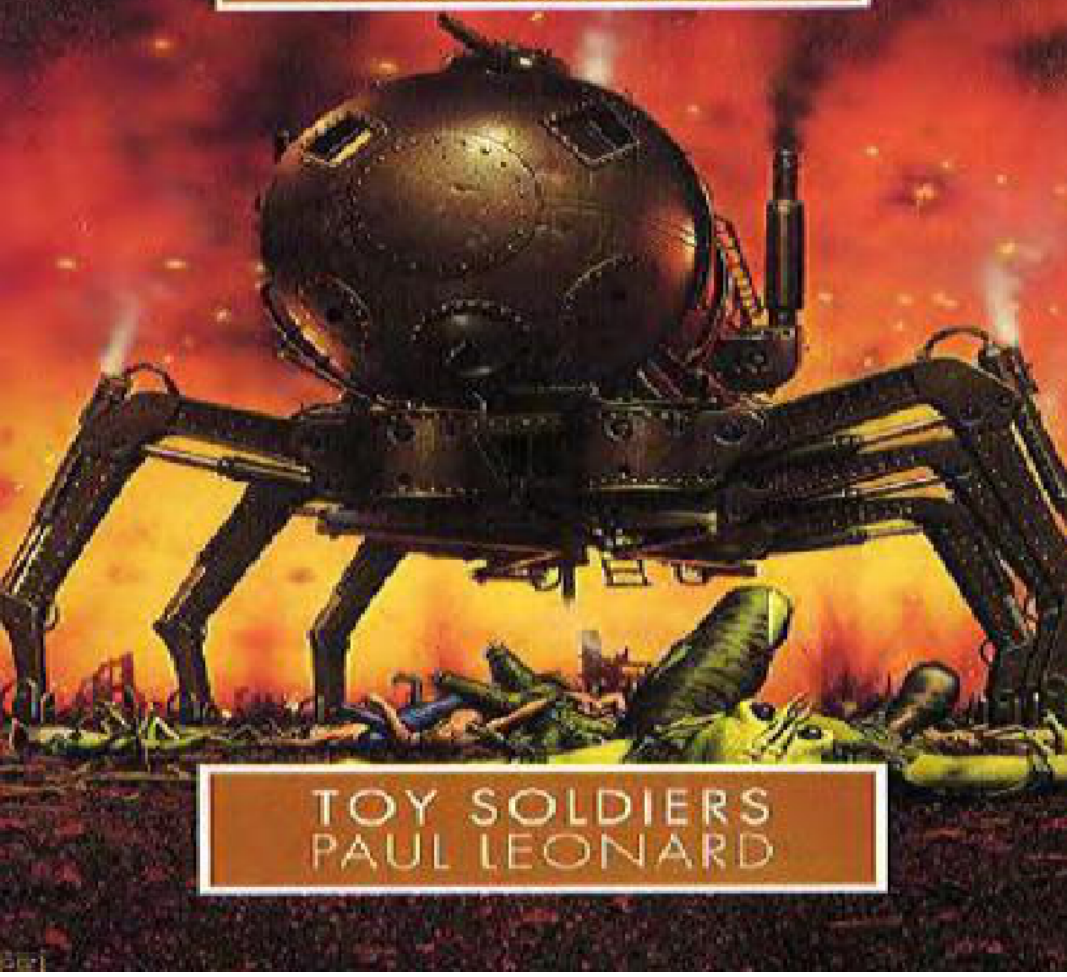
THE NEW

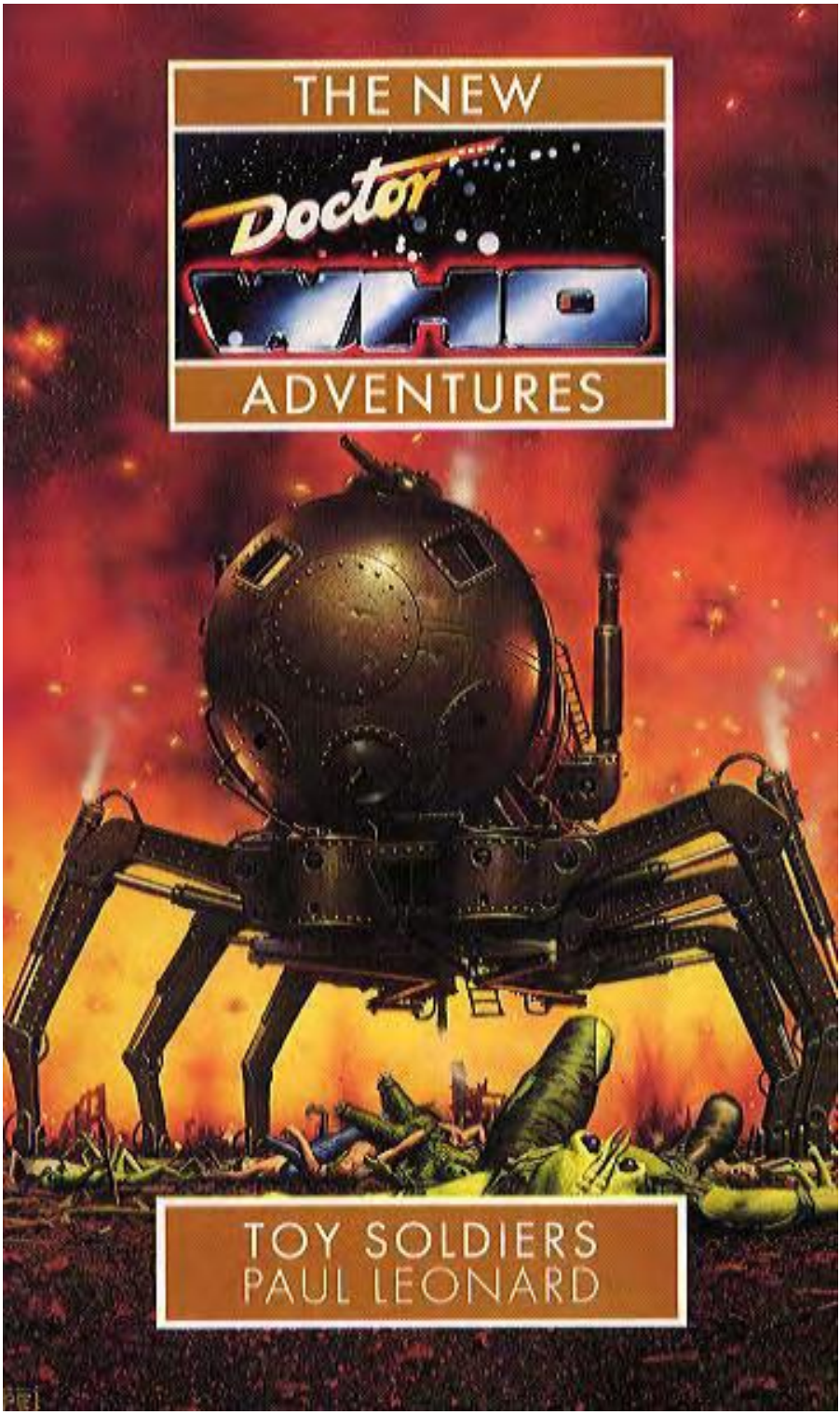
Doctor Who

ADVENTURES



TOY SOLDIERS

PAUL LEONARD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PAUL LEONARD

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Science fiction/TV tie-in

'Children make better soldiers,' said the teddy bear. 'They kill without

compunction.'

The Doctor and Benny are following a trail of kidnapped children across Europe, a continent recovering from the ravages of the First World War.

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Paul Leonard *is the author of the Missing Adventures Venusian Lullaby and Dancing The Code. This is his first New Adventure.*

He lives in Bristol with his three pot plants and and a pile of books he might one day get time to read.

TOY SOLDIERS

PAUL LEONARD

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(moral support!); Anna (friendship, laughter); Shelly (tea and sympathy), and everyone else at BT and elsewhere who helped keep me sane (No sir, it needs to have a Recall button…

Re *call* not Re *dial*… thank you).

This book is dedicated to the memory of **Herbert Harrowing**

1913 – 1995

Musician and raconteur

And a true and loyal friend

They called it the Recruiter.

It could have been so much more. It could have brought them statesmen, philosophers, poets, musicians, artists, athletes, storytellers. It could have brought them jugglers and clowns, masons, bakers, farmers, foresters, wine-makers, woodworkers, architects or inventors.

But they only wanted soldiers.

Book One

Recruitment Parade

Chapter 1

11 November 1918

Someone was singing.

It was a tenor voice, hoarse and out of tune:

'...can't find your way... who's going my way?... can't -

find - my - way - ho-ome!'

Dulled by mud, the words failed to echo along the trench, and were followed by silence. Lieutenant Charles Sutton listened to the silence for a moment, and thought he heard a sob. Reluctantly, he turned and walked along the sodden duckboarding that covered the mud at the bottom of the trench, until he could see the man, curled up on the boards above the hole in the ground that formed the entrance to the dugout. Beneath the mud-stained uniform and the clumps of earth in his hair Sutton recognized Corporal Holder, the youngest of his NCOs. On the opposite side of the trench, the remainder of his platoon - Sergeant Betts, Corporal Dale and a private called Stringer - were sharing a mess tin full of steaming potatoes. Betts caught Lieutenant Sutton's eye and made the smallest of shrugs.

Sutton kneeled down beside the trembling man and spoke gently. 'It's all right, Holder. You're going home. The Armistice came into effect an hour ago. It's all over now.'

Holder removed his hands from his face and stared at Sutton with wild, white eyes. His mouth opened, revealing cracked teeth, a black tongue. 'Who's going my way?' he sang. 'Can't - find - my - way - ' Then he broke off and started sobbing again, tears trickling sideways across his cheeks, leaving streaks in the grime.

Enough, thought Sutton suddenly. Enough. He got up and began to walk away from the voice. Let the MO take care of him. Let his mother take care of him. Let God take care of him, if there is one. Just don't expect me to do it any more.

The war's over now.

‘Can’t - find - my - way - ho-ome!’

Sutton began walking faster. The walls of the trench moved past, rotting planking pitted here and there with shrapnel. A smell of rot and excrement caught at his throat and filled his lungs. After a few hundred yards, the trench came to an end in a wall of broken wood; it had been flattened by shellfire a couple of weeks before and they’d never got around to repairing it.

Well, here’s our chance now, thought Sutton. Whilst there’s a bit of peace. Then he realized what he was thinking.

That he was making plans as if the war wasn’t over, as if it were impossible for the war ever to be over.

‘Who’s going my way ...? Can’t - find - my - ’

Sutton shuddered.

Sod the trench, he thought. There’s no need to repair it ever again. No need at all. Let it rot, let the poppies and the grass and the buttercups grow in it in the spring ...

He felt the sob rising in his throat and didn’t try to control it. He sat down on the last solid piece of boarding and put his head in his hands. Dead faces rose in his mind’s eye: John Staunton, Edward Holt, Gregory Peters - and others, countless others. The images flickered like candle flames, so that he couldn’t be sure of their features, but he knew that they were his friends, because they were singing ‘Can’t find my way ho-ome!’

Sutton clenched his fists, clenched them so tight he could feel the muscles of his arms trembling with the strain.

‘Don’t let it destroy you, not now when it’s so nearly done with.’ Who had said that to him? - Oh, yes, his mother, in her last letter. He thought of the clean white quiet of the house in Bristol, of his sister Carrie’s laughter, of little Manda’s pale face and the teddy bear under her arm, and felt sanity slowly seep back into him. There was a reserve of strength there, he thought: even though they hadn’t been here, couldn’t understand, still somehow the thought that they were alive, safe and well, had comforted him through the four appalling years. And now at last it was over, now he could think of them and know that he would see them again, see them soon, not just on a hasty two weeks’ leave but for ever -

‘Sir!’ Sergeant Betts’s voice. Footsteps on the duckboard, running. ‘Sir!’

Sutton looked up, his whole body jumping to attention at the tone of the man’s voice. The sergeant ran up to him, his thin face white, his grey eyes staring. ‘Are you all right, sir?’

Sutton ‘quickly wiped away the tears that still stood on his face and got up. ‘I’m fine, Sergeant. What’s wrong?’

The sergeant hesitated. ‘Fritz, sir. Three or four of them, up top.’

‘Germans?’ Sutton was bewildered. ‘But under the terms of the Armistice - ’

There was the sound of a shot. Sutton and the sergeant looked at each other, set off at a run.

They saw Holder propped up on the sentry’s ladder looking over the lip of the trench, with a rifle in his hand.

Beneath him, Corporal Dale was standing on the duckboards.

He had also picked up his rifle, and was pointing it at Holder.

Stringer was still sitting on the crate, eating his potatoes.

‘Stop that!’ shouted Sutton.

Holder looked down at him, wordless, his eyes wild.

Then he turned back, fired the rifle again. From outside the trench, there was a scream, followed by the crack of a rifle. A bullet whizzed over the top of the trench.

‘I said stop that!’ Sutton was almost screaming. ‘Do you want to start the war again? *Do you want to start it all again?* ’

Holder fired another shot.

Sergeant Betts started up the ladder, caught hold of the man’s legs, tried to pull him down. The gun went off again, then Holder suddenly went limp, and he and the sergeant both fell off the ladder into the mud. For a moment Sutton thought that Holder had shot himself: then he saw the rolling white eyes, the insane smile.

‘... can’t find your way ... who’s going my way ...?’

Sutton glanced at the sergeant, who was picking himself up, black mud smeared over his chin and the front of his jacket. The man shrugged, picked Holder's rifle out of the mud, clicked the safety on and slowly put it away behind the crate where Stringer was still sitting, watching the proceedings with an expression of bemusement. Sutton started towards the bottom of the ladder. 'I'm going up to take a look.'

'Be careful, sir.' Dale still had his rifle out.

Sutton drew his revolver, climbed the ladder one-handed.

The rungs were unevenly spaced, so that you never quite knew where the next one was going to be. Concentrating on keeping his balance, Sutton found his head above the parapet before he knew it. He saw a sodden, shell-pocked field sloping up in front of him, dark against a misty November sky. The barbed wire that protected the trench lay loosely coiled across the bare earth, drops of water beading some of the spines. Behind the wire -

Behind the wire was a young man in a torn, mud-spattered German uniform, pointing a rifle directly at Sutton.

Sutton swallowed, aimed his revolver. 'Under the terms of the Armistice -' he began.

'Please -' interrupted the German. His voice quavered: he was little more than a boy, Sutton realized. Seventeen, perhaps eighteen. His face was thin and starved, his expression desperate. He looked over his shoulder, a rigid and mechanical gesture, like an exaggerated nervous tic.

'Please - ' he began again. ' *Sie müssen uns helfen. Sie müssen uns in den Schutzengraben kommen lassen*.'

Sutton shook his head. 'I don't understand you,' he said, then added slowly, 'You should not be here. You are in breach of the Armistice.'

As he finished speaking, a second young German stood up, wearing only a trench coat and trousers. He appeared to be unarmed, and seemed even younger than the first. He was holding his left arm with his right; a red stain marked the sleeve, and Sutton could see blood dripping to the ground.

' *Sie müssen uns heruntersteigen kommen lassen*,' said the young German. ' *Sie sind ja ganz hinter uns.* ' He looked over his shoulder again. Sutton

involuntarily glanced up at the ridge above the field, but saw nothing other than barbed wire and sky.

He didn't need to understand the words to realize that the two young men were being pursued - but by whom?

Were they deserters? But why desert now, when there was peace? And if they were deserters, what should he do?

Leave them to be shot by their own army?

'Please,' begged the young man again, perhaps the only English word he knew. ' *Sie sind Bären mit Pistolen. Sie haben viele von uns weg genommen*. Please.'

He had lowered the rifle; Sutton risked a glance down into the trench, saw Sergeant Betts standing, looking up at him with a frown on his face. He had wiped some of the mud from his chin and held a filthy cloth in his hand.

'Need any help, sir?' asked Betts quietly.

Sutton shrugged, shook his head. 'Don't think so.'

There was a shout from the Germans, and the rifle cracked. Sutton whirled round, almost losing his grip on the ladder. He saw the young man crouching, firing away from the trench towards the ridge. Sutton looked up, saw men in strange brown-and-green uniforms running across the ridge, rifles at the ready -

Not men.

Too big for men. And their faces were covered in shaggy brown fur.

Bears? thought Sutton wildly. Bears with guns? Trained bears - some kind of special German thing? But they don't look like bears - the heads are too wide, and the legs and arms are wrong. But in that case, *what are they?*

On the other side of the barbed wire, the German was struggling with his rifle, which must have jammed or run out of ammunition. ' *Hilfe!* ' he screamed.

Sutton levelled his revolver, fired at one of the strange figures.

Missed.

He looked down into the trench, saw Sergeant Betts already climbing the ladder, Dale behind him. Stringer was half-standing, a fork with a steaming potato an inch from his mouth.

'Stringer!' Sutton shouted to the private. 'Up here! Now!'

Stringer hesitated, then dropped the potato and started after Dale.

Sutton looked back at the battlefield and saw that the bearlike things had advanced to within a few yards of the two Germans. Three of them were wading through a shell-hole half filled with water, their legs making loud splashing noises; the others were spread out in a line, approaching the coils of barbed wire. Some had swung their rifles to cover Sutton.

Sutton scrambled up the last few rungs of the ladder and out on to the muddy field. Sergeant Betts came up beside him, stared at the newcomers. Sutton thought about running, telling his men to run, leaving the Germans to their fate, but knew he couldn't do it. 'Give me cover,' he snapped to Betts, and ran forward, crouching down, weaving as best he could in the slippery mud.

Only when he reached his side of the barbed wire barrier did he realize that the Germans had gone. The bearlike things were standing in front of him, three of them side by side in their green uniforms. They held guns in furry, three-fingered hands, and the guns were pointed at him. He struggled to raise his own gun, but his arm refused to move.

Behind him, he heard the crack of rifle fire and a scream of pain. His men were fighting and perhaps dying there, but he couldn't turn, couldn't go back. His body simply refused to obey him.

Behind the motionless figures, the sharp edge of the ridge blurred, began to show red and blue edges as if he were looking at it through damaged binoculars. As Sutton watched, the images separated, stretched, until all he could see was a rainbow smeared out all around him, and the sharp, clear figures of the bears.

I've gone mad, he thought. Mad, like Holder. I didn't make it after all.

But it didn't feel like a delusion. The bearlike things were solid and, despite their strangeness, real. Mud matted the coarse fur on their faces and the lower part of their legs, below their grey-and-green trousers. He could smell a musky odour, could hear the faint, growling sound of their breathing.

And something else.

The whistling of shells.

The crash of explosions.

The rattle of machine-guns.

The light changed again, lost its colours, became dull and brown. The ground shifted slightly under his feet. He looked down, saw mud, thick and dark.

But different from the French mud, somehow. Thicker.

Heavier. Worse.

The ground shook with the familiar sound of an exploding shell. Sutton swallowed, looked around him. Saw smoke, dirt, men running.

Not men. More of the bearlike things.

He looked up at his captors, who still held their guns, opened his mouth. ‘What - ?’

‘You have been reassigned,’ said one, in a deep, booming voice. ‘Training and assessment will take three days. Then you will join the appropriate unit here at the front.’

12 February 1919

Josef Tannenbaum stared along the cold metal curve of the railway track and tried not to think about how hungry he was.

Instead he stamped his cracked boots in the brown slush that covered the sides of the track, and breathed on his hands in an attempt to get some of the feeling back into them. When the train came, he knew that he would have to be able to get a good grip.

Josef looked over his shoulder at the other children, the ones waiting a hundred metres further down by the place where the road from the village crossed the track. He couldn’t see their faces in the dull morning light, but he knew who they were anyway. They were dressed like him, in long, dark coats, and their boots were probably worn out too. They were probably as hungry as he was. But it was going to be easier for them: the train always slowed down for the crossing, so it would be travelling very slowly when it passed them.

Getting a grip on the sides of the wooden wagons would be easier down there.

But Josef would be the first. By the time the train had got to the other children, Josef would have clambered up on to the top of the wagon, pushed the tarpaulin back and picked out the biggest sack he could carry. And by the time they got on board he would be off the other side of the train. Away before they could catch him. Before they could call him a Jew-boy. Before they could say he wasn't entitled to any food, he wasn't a real German, that all the food should go to real Germans. Josef still had the bruises from the last time they had said those things, the first time he had tried to rob the train.

It wasn't fair. They knew as well as he did that there wasn't any food because of the war, and because the French and the English and the Americans were still blockading Germany even though the Armistice had been signed. It wasn't anything to do with the Jews. The Jews had fought as hard for Germany as anyone else in the war - perhaps harder. Josef's own father was dead, killed in a battle at a place called Somme. Josef hardly remembered him, though he remembered his mother crying, her face raw and puffy and wet and frighteningly strange.

This time I'll make it, he thought. I'll get the sack to the house, and we'll open it, and there'll be carrots and turnips and cabbages and parsnips and potatoes, and Mother will boil them up in the big copper pan. He saw his mother as she'd used to be, strong and tall and plump, stirring the supper, even though he knew she was weak and pale, her face gaunt, her body so thin that her clothes hung loosely on it, and his sister Edi -

Edi would die if Josef didn't get her the extra food soon.

She already had the sores on her lips and her gums. She had even tried to eat that toy bear that the man from Hamburg had brought. Her lips had chewed on its wiry fur, and then she had coughed, covering it with foamy spittle. Mother had taken it away from her, cleaned it up, given it to Josef. The man had said it would bring them luck. Josef had it tucked under his coat now, nestling in the gap in the lining. It did feel curiously warm against him - and Josef was sure he felt stronger than he had last time, even though he had eaten nothing all day. Perhaps it really was a lucky bear.

A faint vibration beneath his feet brought Josef out of his daydream. He listened for a moment, standing quite still, then crouched down

and put an ear close to the icy track. As soon as he did that, he could hear it clearly: *thud-click, thud-click, thud-click*. He heard shouts from the others. They had heard it too. It wouldn't be long now. Josef looked along the track again, concentrating on the point where it curved away between the fir trees, looking for the first sign of movement, the first trace of steam clouding above the trees.

But then he heard another sound: that of jeers and shouts. He looked over his shoulder, saw three figures detach themselves from the group by the crossing and begin to run down the side of the track towards him. Josef recognized the Schneider brothers, the ones whose father said that Germany had lost the war because of the Jews.

Bertoldt, the eldest, was twelve, three years older than Josef.

'Jew-boy!' Bertoldt's breath frosted the air as he shouted.

He'd already covered more than half the distance to the place where Josef was standing. 'What're you doing here? You've no right!'

'We'll kill you this time!' shrieked one of the others.

Josef's stomach contracted in panic. He ran as fast as he could along the middle of the track where the snow had all been pushed away by the trains. There was ice, but it was only between the sleepers. As long as he stepped on the sleepers he shouldn't fall. He concentrated on that, on not slipping, and tried not to think about the knifelike pain in his empty belly, or the shouts and thudding footsteps behind him.

Ahead, as the track curved, the trees closed in around it, tall, dark firs, their tops caked with snow. Josef knew he should get away from the track and try to lose his pursuers in the forest before he was trapped between them and the oncoming train. But he couldn't quite bring himself to do it; couldn't quite give up the dream that, somehow, he would still get up on the train, still grab the sack of vegetables and get them home to his mother and Edi.

With a shock, he realized that the train was ahead of him now, less than a hundred metres away. He stopped dead, staring at it in confusion. Where had it come from? It hadn't been there a moment ago. But he could see the full length of it along the curve of the track, four or five carriages painted in brown, and a blue so bright that they almost seemed to be glowing with a light of their own. And there were lights in the windows, electric lights, so bright that they shone out through the dim snowy daylight, illuminating the trunks of the trees.

This wasn't a goods train, it was a passenger train, and for important passengers at that. Even though it was going quite slowly, Josef knew that he hadn't any chance of getting aboard. The doors would be locked, there would be guards, perhaps soldiers. There'd be no food for him or his mother or Edi here.

Josef stepped off the track, sank up to his knees in the dirty bank of snow beside the rails. He looked back to his pursuers, saw that they too had stopped and were staring at the train.

No, that wasn't right. It was something stranger than that.

Bertoldt was frozen in mid-air, in the act of jumping over a woodpile near the edge of the track. As Josef watched, the older boy's body blurred, blue on one side, red on the other.

Josef struggled to run towards him, suddenly wanting him to be real again. Even though Bertoldt might beat him up, might try to kill him, it was better than - better than -

Josef swallowed, looked back at the advancing train. The engine was less than fifty metres away now. He could hear the steam issuing from the boiler, a cold, mechanical sound.

Perhaps I'm dead, thought Josef. Perhaps I died in my sleep or the train ran over me or the Schneiders killed me and this is the Train of Death.

But he had to admit that it didn't look like a Train of Death. Even the engine was painted in red and yellow, and there was a driver in a bright uniform leaning out. Without any reason, Josef suddenly felt oddly soothed, calm, as if he were a tiny child again, a child of Edi's age, and the funfair had come to town. The war - his hunger - none of that seemed to matter any more. In fact, he didn't even feel hungry. His stomach, his guts, felt full, comfortable.

It was a wonderful feeling.

The engine was pulling up beside him now, warm air spilling out around his body. Josef could see that the driver was a bear. A big, furry, friendly bear in his yellow-and-red uniform with a peaked cap and warm green eyes. He reached out with a big, three-fingered paw.

Josef hesitated. He shouldn't just leave like this. He had responsibilities. 'Will you look after my mother and Edi?' he asked the bear. 'Will you get food for them? They really need food.'

‘Don’t worry,’ said the bear in a growly voice. ‘We will come for them as well, soon. I promise. It is all being arranged. You will help us.’

Josef nodded. He reached out and caught hold of the bear’s paw. The fur was warm and prickly, and felt alive. The bear pulled him up on to the footplate; it was curiously easy, as if he didn’t weigh anything. His feet landed on a brassy metal surface. Somehow, a door had shut behind him, though Josef hadn’t heard it closing, or even seen it there when he had stepped through.

He looked out around the side of the boiler. The Schneider boys were still there beside the track, blurred now as if they’d been melted into a rainbow, and all around them the forest was a rainbow too. As he watched, the colours blurred even more, swirled and eddied until there was no more forest, no more railway track, only colours.

A tiny part of Josef’s mind was shouting that this was impossible, that something terrible was happening, that he should be very, very afraid. To quiet it, he turned to the driver and asked, ‘Where are we going?’

A warm, furry arm went around his shoulder: warm, sweet-scented breath moved across his cheek.

‘It’s all right, Josef. There’s nothing to be afraid of. You’re going to help us fight a war. A good and just war. You’re going to be a great hero.’

26 March 1919

Gabrielle decided that weddings were boring. She had had to wear this stupid green dress and hang around in that stupid cold draughty church and speak English to all her stupid cousins who couldn’t even speak French and it wasn’t even warm and sunny in Provence like Mamma had said it would be.

Gabrielle shivered and hugged the toy bear closer to her chest. Gabrielle was twelve now, and considered herself too old for toys, but the man in the top hat had been so nice, he’d said it was a free sample and that it would bring her luck and her mamma had smiled, so Gabrielle hadn’t really had much choice but to take it. And it was true, it did help to keep her warm. She rubbed the bear against her goose-pimpled arms, felt the warmth soak into her.

On the other side of the square, outside the church, the photographer was getting ready. He crouched behind the big leather-cased camera

perched on its tripod, cape over his head. In front of him the bride and groom stood, happy but a little bewildered, in the middle of a crowd of guests, the women in new, colourful, fashionable dresses and hats with plumes, the men in smart morning-suits. Gabrielle could hear her mamma's booming voice: 'Tallest ones get to the back, please! No, no, not you, Jean-Pierre, you're the bridegroom, or had you forgotten already? Mr Henry

- Mr Henry, please! To the back!'

Gabrielle crept a little further away from the crowd, her eyes on the wide, stone stairway built in to the towering redbrick wall of the château that dominated the main square of Septangy. She gazed up, following the curve of the steps to where the dull bricks met the grey of the sky. Yes. That was where she wanted to be. Away from all this noise, all this fuss and photography. She was twelve years old now, and she would do what she liked.

She ducked and ran quickly to the bottom of the steps.

Keeping her head down, so that she was almost concealed by the low parapet on the outside of the steps, she started up them.

She was about half-way up when she heard her mamma's piercing cry: 'Gabrielle! Where are you? Come back here! The man is ready to take the photograph!'

Gabrielle decided to take no notice. She couldn't be seen from the square now: the curve of the tower was in the way.

She'd get a telling-off when they found her, but she was always getting told off for something or other anyway, so that made no difference.

'Gabri *elle*!'

At the top of the steps, there was a wide balcony with iron gates leading into the courtyard of the château. Gabrielle scrambled up on to the parapet, revelling in the wind that buffeted her face and roared in her ears. When she stood up, it seemed she could see the whole of Provence: the orange-tiled roofs of Septangy, the slim green pines, the gardens and fields spotted with faded winter trees. Beyond, there were other clusters of whiteand-orange houses, the orderly brown ranks of vineyards on hillsides, and a dull grey road. She saw a red motor car moving slowly along the road, and followed it with her eyes as it appeared and disappeared between the trees and houses, winding its

way towards the grey hills on the horizon. She wished that she was driving the car, the air blowing in her face, the pines and the farmhouses and the fields racing by - or better still, she wished she was flying, like Blériot himself. She tried to imagine it was true, tried to believe that the parapet wasn't beneath her feet, that the nearby roofs of the town weren't there, that she was flying, truly flying, with the wind in her face -

'Gabrielle! Where are you?' Gabrielle could hear the click of her mother's shoes on the stone steps, ascending the long curve of the stairway towards her. 'You are holding everyone up!'

Hide, thought Gabrielle. But where?

She looked along the parapet, saw that it continued beyond the balcony, where the wall of one of the towers joined the outer wall of the château. The walk was only half a metre wide, but Gabrielle wasn't afraid of heights. If she went far enough along, her mother wouldn't be able to see her from the balcony.

Holding the toy bear firmly against her chest with one arm, she ran quickly along the parapet. As she rounded the tower, a gust of wind caught her, pushing her towards the edge, but it didn't scare her. She just leaned into the wind and concentrated on keeping her feet well away from the edge. She would be all right. Hadn't the man said that the teddy bear would bring her luck?

'Gabri *elle*!' Mamma sounded worried now. Well, let her worry. What had Mamma ever done for her, except shout at her and make her do things she didn't want to do? And since Papa had been killed she'd whined on and on about it; you'd think that there weren't any other widows in the world but her.

Gabrielle was fed up with it. She wanted something different.

She wanted freedom. She wanted the wind in her face.

She sat down cross-legged on the parapet, careless of the fact that she would be getting dust all over her dress. A delicious, soft feeling came over her, and the toy bear snuggled against her chest seemed to glow with warmth. She hugged it tighter, looked out into the sky and saw something moving in the distance, silhouetted against the clouds.

Something with wide wings, moving steadily. Something too big to be a bird.

An aeroplane!

She could hear the faint thrum of its engine now. It was a monoplane, like Blériot's, the one he had flown from Dover to Calais in 1909. In fact, as it drew closer, she could see that it was almost exactly like Blériot's plane - Gabrielle had seen the pictures in the newspaper often enough to know.

Sometimes, when Mamma had locked her in her bedroom for being a bad girl, Gabrielle had dreamed that the great

'birdman' would come and rescue her, that he would fly her away to where it was always sunny and the clouds were great golden cliffs against the blue of the sky.

But Gabrielle was old enough to know the difference between the things you want to be true and the things that are true: she knew that Blériot hadn't come to rescue her from Mamma, that this must be some local airman doing a

'stunt'. As the plane gently banked around the bell-tower of the church, Gabrielle saw the pilot waving at her. He was a huge, heavy man -

No. Not a man. He looked like a *bear*.

The plane was very close now, hovering above the square in a way that Gabrielle knew was impossible. It drifted slowly towards the place where she sat on the parapet. The bear in the cockpit stood up, and Gabrielle saw it wasn't really like a bear, it was more like the toy bear that the man had given her, the toy bear that was sitting in her lap now.

She knew she ought to be startled, even afraid, but somehow she couldn't be. It all seemed perfectly natural, as if it were meant to happen.

'Hello, Gabrielle,' called the bear. 'Would you like to go for a ride?'

Its eyes were a startling pale green.

The teddy bear's paw - no, *hand*, she saw, three thick fingers and a long thumb - was stretched out towards her.

The wind had gone and the air had become warm, thick, comfortable. Glancing down at the square, Gabrielle saw that it was blurred,

darkened, almost as if it were under water.

She could see the figure of a man in a morning suit, curiously smudged, blue on one side and red on the other. He seemed to be frozen in mid-step.

But that was all right. Everything was all right now. She was going to get away from Mamma. She was going to be free.

She stood up, gripping the toy bear against her, and looked at the gap between herself and the cockpit of the monoplane. It didn't seem too wide: her body felt strangely light. She jumped, felt the teddy bear's hand grip hers. It was warm, the fur prickly. She landed neatly in the back seat.

'Well *done*, Gabrielle,' said the bearlike pilot. 'You'll soon learn.'

The grey sky had changed, turned to a strange, violet colour. The walls of the château were blurring, red on one side, blue on the other. And the plane - the plane seemed bigger, somehow, more closed-in than it should have been.

Gabrielle felt a tremor of fear.

'What am I going to learn?' she asked.

The pilot looked over its shoulder, stared at her with its green eyes. Close to, she noticed that they had no pupils, no whites; they were flat, blank, like pieces of pale green glass.

'Don't worry,' said the pilot. 'It's nothing difficult, Gabrielle. And it won't take long.' The alien hand reached back and squeezed hers, gently. 'We're going to teach you to fly.'

Chapter 2

Amalie Govier could hear the police car coming closer. The driver was using the horn on every corner as he navigated the narrow streets of Septangy. It was a painfully slow progress, accompanied by the roaring of the engine and the frequent grinding of gears.

Septangy is a maze, thought Amalie.

The children in the wedding party were still searching, calling to each other, excited, as if this were a game of hide-and-seek. James, her

English cousin who had an estate in British East Africa, had got them organized as if they were native beaters at a hunt, and they'd thoroughly enjoyed it. But Amalie had stopped looking, now. Stopped moving. Almost stopped thinking. The only thing she could still think was, *If Nicolas were alive...* But Nicolas wasn't alive, he was dead, dead twelve months in the mud of Ypres, he couldn't advise her any more, he couldn't help her now, now when she needed him most, when Gabrielle, their child, the only part of him that she had left, had gone missing.

Nadienne, the bride, sat down by Amalie's side on the bench. She had pulled back the veil of her wedding dress: her plain round face, so recently bright with happiness, was tense and serious, and her bulging brown eyes registered intense concern. She wasn't concerned that her wedding day was spoiled, that her honeymoon plans might be thrown into confusion - she was concerned for Amalie. Her eyes showed that, the touch of her hand on Amalie's wrist showed that.

Amalie would have hugged her, but didn't want to risk crushing the delicate lace trim of the wedding dress.

'She may just have wandered off and fallen asleep somewhere,' said the younger woman after a moment. 'Or maybe she's hiding - a silly cruel game. Perhaps she will come back when all the fuss has died down, laughing at us.'

Amalie shrugged. 'She only had that thin dress on. And she's so sensitive to the cold.' Her voice was ragged, her throat hot and dry from shouting and crying.

With a final blare of its horn, the police car at last entered the square and clattered to a halt, its dull black paint covered with dust. A smart gendarme jumped out of the driver's seat, scanned the scene briefly, then walked towards Amalie. His face was handsome, black hair forming a neat line across his forehead beneath the brim of his cap.

'Madame Govier? I'm sorry it has taken so long for me to get here. The road from Touleville is not good.'

Amalie waved away the apology, feeling sick and weary.

Somehow this arrival - the official recognition of the incident -

had the effect of making it more real to her. Of making it final.

Gabrielle was gone. Maybe she was dead, like Nicolas.

Maybe even God couldn't bring her back.

The gendarme spoke softly. 'You've searched everywhere?'

Amalie nodded again. 'Everyone has helped. The whole town has been out. The children have looked in the places where children go. She's not here. She's gone.'

'And there's no one who could have - taken her away?

Legitimately, I mean? A relative for instance?'

Amalie looked away, stared at the ancient red bricks of the château. She heard Nadienne speak for her.

'Everyone Gabrielle knew in this part of the country is here in this square now. No one's missing.'

One of Nadienne's young bridesmaids was standing on the steps of the château, perhaps twenty metres away, her pink dress crimped up to the knees and slightly muddied.

Beside her stood a negro woman, talking to her.

Amalie blinked. A negro woman? Where had she come from? Was she something to do with James? But surely he would have told her if he had brought a servant.

Besides which, despite her race, the woman didn't look like a servant. She was wearing European clothes, a riding outfit by the look of it: loose-fitting black trousers, a dull red woollen jacket, and high-sided leather boots. She wore no hat. Her hair was short-cropped, greying around the fringes.

She turned, gazed at Amalie with an even, intelligent gaze, a gaze that seemed to read from Amalie's face the shock, the fear and the guilt, assess them, give a verdict. It was the look of an independent person, a person who knew her place in the world and didn't have to take orders from anyone.

But there remained the problem of what she was doing here. She certainly hadn't been at the wedding, and Amalie was fairly sure there were no negroes living in Septangy, certainly none with the independent bearing this woman seemed to have. Such a thing would have been spoken of.

She must have ridden in this morning, or perhaps even this afternoon.

The gendarme coughed, and Amalie saw that he was holding a blue notebook and a pencil. ‘I will need to take some details,’ he said.

‘Just a moment.’ But when Amalie looked round again, the negro woman was gone. The bridesmaid, Christine, was trotting across the square. She stopped in front of Amalie, a little out of breath, and started smoothing her skirt, brushing at the mud. As if that mattered.

‘Christine, who is that foreigner you were talking to?’

asked Amalie gently.

Christine glanced at the gendarme, then blushed, her eyes to the ground. ‘She was helping us look for Gabrielle,’

she said. ‘Her name’s Forrester.’

There was a pause. Amalie and the gendarme looked at one another.

‘She was looking for the teddy bear that Gabrielle had,’

added Christine, blushing again. ‘She said it was important.’

‘The teddy bear!’ Amalie stared. She remembered the tall man with the toy bear, smiling and patting Gabrielle on the head that morning. He had said that the bear was a sample.

What could he have to do with anything?

A dark pit opened up at the bottom of her mind. Perhaps the man, having won Gabrielle’s trust with the toy, had come back and taken her away. Perhaps even now he was driving her to Lyons, or on the train to Paris. God knew what he had told her. Something about aeroplanes, most probably.

Gabrielle was such a fool about aeroplanes. And she had looked so pretty in that dress - so grown-up - oh, that dress had been a mistake.

The gendarme was asking something; Amalie, her stomach churning, just shook her head.

‘Madame Govier - I said, when did Gabrielle obtain this toy?’

Nadienne answered, ‘Before the wedding. I saw her carrying it in the church.’

‘I saw it too,’ said Christine.

‘And the foreign woman - she knew about it, but she was not at the wedding?’ asked the gendarme.

Suddenly Amalie could stand no more of it. ‘Of course she knew!’ she shouted. ‘She is in league with him!’ That would explain it, she thought: the fine clothes, the independent bearing. The woman had escaped the usual servile fate of her race by becoming a criminal. But at the same time another part of her mind was telling Amalie that it didn’t make any sense, that the woman would not have stayed behind if -

The gendarme was speaking. ‘In league with whom, Madame Govier?’

Amalie told him about the man in the tall hat. When she had finished, he nodded, looked around sharply. ‘Perhaps we should question this foreign woman. Where has she gone?’

Christine, evidently aware that this could be very important, said carefully, ‘She said that she had to meet a friend, but she might be back later.’

The gendarme met Amalie’s eyes, gave the tiniest of shrugs. Amalie felt the dark pit at the bottom of her mind get deeper. She remembered that her cousin James had said you could never trust the Africans, however intelligent and apparently loyal they were.

‘We will look for her,’ said the gendarme. ‘We will find her, Madame Govier. Don’t worry. I will telephone Lyons and ask them to check the roads and the railway station.’

Amalie was not convinced. She knew that it was going to need more than efficiency to find her daughter now, now that she was in the hands of -

She didn’t dare to think of a name for the man who must have taken Gabrielle. She looked up at the dark shape of the château and the heavy grey bell-jar of the sky above it.

‘Gabrielle!’ she murmured. ‘Gabrielle! Where have they taken you?’

Hannah Tannenbaum leaned against the window, forehead pressed against the cold pane, watching the stranger make his way down the street in the frosty sunshine. He was well-fed; he walked briskly, and his eyes were bright and alive.

This alone marked him out as rich, as much as his linen suit, fedora hat and silk scarf. Perhaps, thought Hannah, he was an artist - his clothes, and his manner, were not right for an aristocrat or a professional man. She wondered what an artist was doing in Breslau, and why he hadn't been conscripted into the army.

The stranger stopped at each of the little houses in the street, seeming to examine them. He poked at the stones of the wall with the coloured umbrella he was carrying, or pressed his nose to the windows, or did both. Like a child in a street of toy shops, she thought - and that made her think of Josef, and then her heart clenched inside her and she prayed, *please, please*.

She looked over her shoulder at her living-room, bare of everything except the hard wooden table and the chairs, and Edi's bed, which Hannah had brought downstairs for warmth.

The little girl was silent, asleep probably, her breathing rapid and troubled.

All I have left, thought Hannah, and forgetting about the stranger she made her way across the bare boards to Edi's bedside. The girl's white face was still, cold; a sticky line of pus ran over her chin from one of the sores on her lips.

Hannah spat on a handkerchief and wiped it away, as gently as possible. Edi stirred, gave a hacking cough, then shuddered and went back to sleep.

Oh God, if she's getting a cold, if she gets pneumonia - if only the rations were more, if only we could get more food - if only Josef - Josef.

'We were chasing him and he vanished.' That was what the Schneider boys had said. That he'd vanished before their eyes. They'd made out it was a game they'd been having, this chase, though Hannah had known better. The policeman, Weiss, hadn't pressed them. All he had done was assure Hannah that every effort would be made to find her son.

And oh, they had looked. Szymon and Itzhak Goldblum, their cousin Rebecca who was staying with them, all had turned out, and the old men Lutek and Artur Feigenbaum.

Even David Bau, the orphan, himself hardly older than Josef and almost as ill as Edi, had weakly insisted that Josef was his friend and

he must come and help them to look for him.

They had followed Josef's trail down the railway track, they had walked around in the dark cold of the forest, they had called and called and called. Meanwhile Weiss had telegraphed Munich to see if Josef had jumped on to the train and gone there. 'No trace,' the reply had been. But railway staff, Weiss said, had more things to do than check for stowaways. Hannah knew that Weiss thought Josef had run away, possibly from the Schneiders to start with, then, once he'd started, from the whole icy starving mess that was the countryside, in the hope of finding life and warmth in the city.

Hannah's protests that he wouldn't leave her, that he knew she needed him to help with Edi, had gone unheeded.

But now, six weeks later, when he had not returned, she hoped that Weiss was right. She would forgive Josef for deserting her, forgive him anything if only he was still alive.

Please, she prayed again. *Please let him be alive*.

Hannah was jolted back to the present by a rapping at the window. She turned and saw the red crook-handle of an umbrella rap against the pane. Startled, she put her hand to her mouth, then remembered the stranger who had been walking down the street.

She walked to the window, called, 'Yes? What do you want?'

His face appeared, pressed against the pane, his breath misting the glass. Blue-grey eyes bulged at her, a mouth grimaced. She fell back in shock. The stranger frowned, mouthed something, then frowned more deeply, his entire face creasing. There was something inescapably comic about it; Hannah wondered if he were a circus clown rather than an artist.

'What do you want?' she repeated.

The umbrella handle tapped against the window again.

Hannah hesitated, then saw the stranger shake his head and disappear from her view. She ran to the window, saw his back retreating down the street, his head swinging this way and that as if admiring the view.

She realized that she couldn't just let him go. She had to speak to him.

She opened the window, shouted hello. She almost asked, Do you have any food? - but that would have been begging, and Hannah did not beg.

The stranger turned, repeated the exaggerated frown Hannah had seen through the window. ‘I’m looking for the mother of a little boy,’ he said at last. ‘And the owner of a teddy bear.’

Hannah almost fainted. Suddenly she was acutely aware of her own hunger, her own weakness, the things she tried constantly to forget in the battle to keep Edi alive until this cruel blockade was ended.

‘I’ she began weakly, then started again. ‘My little boy is missing,’ she said. ‘And yes - he had a teddy bear.’ She paused. The stranger remained staring at her, the deep frown still on his face. ‘Have you found it?’ Still the stranger didn’t move. For some irrational reason Hannah began to feel hope. ‘Have you -’ she swallowed. ‘Have you found Josef?’

The stranger marched back to her window, ignoring the door. To her amazement he put a foot, clad in a polished leather shoe, up on to the windowsill.

‘No, but it’s possible that I will. Eventually. May I come in?’

The Auberge de Septangy was crowded. Several young men, still in their wedding best, were playing billiards. The women from the wedding party sat around the polished wooden tables, talking in low voices. Henri, Nadienne’s father and Amalie’s brother, looked almost as if he were on guard at the door. He looked round the room repeatedly, his face stern. From time to time he stroked his grey moustache -

which Amalie knew was a sign that he was worried. Well, she thought, he ought to be worried. But what could he do? What could any of them do, but trust in the gendarmerie, and pray.

Wearily, she signalled to Claude, behind the counter. The old man nodded, and a moment later shuffled up to her table with a small dark glass of armagnac.

‘That’s your fifth,’ said Nadienne. At some time during the afternoon she’d managed to change her wedding dress for smart yellow travelling clothes. There were even fresh flowers pinned to her hat. Her new husband, Jean-Pierre, didn’t appear to have had time to change; he sat crouched forward in his seat, his suit rumpled,

occasionally scratching his head, as if unsure of his role in this unexpected situation.

But Nadienne was sure of hers. She patted Amalie's hand, said, 'Now that must be the last one. When they find Gabrielle you don't want to be drunk, do you?'

'They won't find Gabrielle.'

Nadienne glanced at her husband. 'Now, Amalie, you know they'll find her. Soon.'

Amalie shook her head. It was the one thing she was sure of, that she would never see her child again. She knew that by the way her own hand moved when she reached out for her glass of armagnac: as if it were a dead thing, a wooden thing, being pulled by puppet-strings. The burn of the brandy in her mouth, too, was unreal. As if it were happening to someone else, a different woman who hadn't lost her daughter and could still take pleasure in the taste of things.

There was a movement in the corner of her eye, outside, beyond the wide square windows of the bar. Amalie turned her head, saw the negro woman that she had seen in the square earlier. She was still wearing her riding clothes. She looked at Amalie, with the same independent, judging gaze she had used earlier, then beckoned.

Amalie jumped in shock. 'It's her!' she shouted.

Faces everywhere turned to stare at her. Voices called her name. She ignored them, lurched to her feet and strode towards the door.

'Gabrielle!' she called. 'You have got my Gabrielle!'

'For God's sake -' Jean-Pierre's voice. A hand caught Amalie's arm. She struggled to shake it off, almost fell.

'But she's out there! She beckoned to me!'

She reached the door, pushed it open. The negro woman was standing there, a slight smile on her face. A very tall young man in a morning-suit stood by her side. He was glancing uncertainly up and down the street.

'Amalie Govier?' said the woman.

Amalie nodded, unsure what to say. Had these people come to ask for

a ransom for Gabrielle?

‘We thought we should tell you how we’re coming along,’

said the woman. ‘With the investigation. With trying to find Gabrielle, that is.’

‘You’re trying to find her?’ asked Amalie. ‘But I thought - I mean, who - ?’

She was interrupted by Henri’s voice. ‘What is this?

Where have you taken Gabrielle?’

‘We haven’t taken her anywhere, sir,’ said the tall man.

‘We’re private investigators.’

‘We’re trying to help,’ added the woman.

Henri pushed past Amalie, into the street. ‘Private investigators?’ he asked. ‘Employed by whom?’

The tall man and the negro woman looked at each other.

‘That’s confidential at the moment,’ said the woman.

Henri strode forward, his heavy body blocking Amalie’s view for a moment. He looked down at the woman, then up at the man. ‘You will tell me who is employing you, *now*. Or you will have to explain it to the police.’

Amalie became aware of Jean-Pierre and several of the younger men behind her. She heard someone mutter, ‘We should arrest them ourselves -’, another, ‘Can’t trust foreigners.’ Most of the men were officers, on leave from the army; obviously they had already decided that the strangers were guilty.

But Amalie wasn’t so sure any more. They seemed -

gentle, somehow. The young man in particular seemed naïve, even a little confused, his blue eyes shifting around the crowd in a puzzled way as if he simply couldn’t understand their hostility. And - she remembered her earlier reasoning - why stay around, why claim to be investigators, if they were in fact the kidnappers? It didn’t make any sense.

She walked past Henri, who was standing with folded arms staring at the coloured woman, and touched the tall young man's arm. 'What have you found out? Do you know where Gabrielle is?'

He looked down at her, clearly relieved to find someone behaving in a friendly manner. But he shook his head. 'Sorry, ma'am. We haven't managed to -'

'We do know where she isn't,' interrupted the woman.

'She's not on -' She broke off, started again. 'She's not in France any more.'

Amalie heard Henri gasp with surprise, heard angry mutterings of disbelief break out behind her. She ignored them.

'But she's still alive?' she asked, hardly daring to hope.

'She'll be OK,' said the woman. 'If we can find her in time. But we may need some help.' She glanced around the crowd. 'The girl we spoke to this morning said that somebody gave her a teddy bear. Did anyone see this person?'

Amalie stared. 'I saw him,' she said slowly. 'I spoke to him. I said he could give her the toy.' She felt her stomach tighten, as she remembered her earlier fears. She gripped the young man's arms. 'Tell me! Is he a white slaver?

Does he want a ransom? Just tell me what's happening!'

It was the woman who replied. 'We don't know what's happening. Not yet.' She paused, looked at the ground. 'But I can tell you that letting her take the teddy bear may not have been a very good idea.'

'Taking the teddy bear was a mistake. Possibly a serious one.'

The Doctor was pacing to and fro in the tiny room, prodding the bare boards from time to time with his umbrella and glancing down at Edi, who was asleep again. The stranger hadn't said what he was a doctor of, but he had given Edi something to chew which he said would improve her condition, and had produced a couple of pies and a small loaf of rye bread from one of his pockets. He'd insisted that Hannah eat one of the pies before they talked, 'to sharpen up your brain'; she'd nibbled at it, slowly and suspiciously at first, then greedily. It had tasted like chicken, but the Doctor had told her it was some kind of plant thing, better than chicken.

Hannah was fairly sure he was lying and that the food was black market - perhaps smuggled through the blockade; she could see the English name ‘Sainsbury’ on the grease-proofed paper wrapped around the pies, and some kind of rubber-stamped code, also in English, ‘USE BY 29 09 95’.

But it was a gift, and no one could arrest her for taking a gift.

Especially if she had already eaten the evidence. She looked at the other pie and the loaf on the table, almost expecting them to vanish before she got a chance to eat them.

‘It was definitely a man who gave you the teddy bear?’

asked the Doctor, stopping his pacing and turning to face Hannah. ‘I mean, there wasn’t anything unusual about him?

He didn’t have green skin? Scales? Horns?’

Hannah stared at her visitor. He appeared to be perfectly serious.

The Doctor must have noticed her incomprehension. He said quickly, ‘There are things going on here beyond those you would normally accept as real. You have to believe that.

Green skin, horns and scales are possible. So are oddly shaped ears, oddly coloured eyes, odd numbers of limbs.

Anything.’

Hannah stared at him, trying to read the truth from his face. Was he just tormenting her? She had never believed in magic - all nonsense and sleight of hand, her husband used to say. But looking into the Doctor’s eyes, she had a feeling of immense forces stirring, of some fundamental conflict in which this man was a champion. But on which side? Her instincts shouted: the good one, the right one. But they had said that last time, about the other stranger

- that he had been good, that he had been kind - and she had taken the teddy bear, and that had been a mistake.

Or at least, this man said it had been a mistake. Who was she supposed to believe? She looked at Edi, quietly curled up in her bed, her lips stained pink from the medicine that the Doctor had given her.

Cautiously she said: ‘He was an ordinary man. Taller than you,

dressed as a gentleman. He said he was selling the toys, but that nobody wanted them because of the shortages, they are saving all their money for black-market food. He said that Edi could have it. He gave her a chocolate, too, and said he wished he could offer more but

- ' 'Never mind the chocolate,' interrupted the Doctor. 'He gave the bear to Edi? Not to Josef?'

'Yes, but Edi - Edi -' She felt the tears start, quite suddenly. She tried to control them, ashamed of crying in front of this man, but felt them flow down her cheeks just the same. 'Edi tried to eat it, she was raving, I thought she might choke so I gave it to Josef.' She stopped, sobbed helplessly, once, then wiped her face with her hand and made a forced smile. 'I'm sorry - it's so difficult -'

The Doctor, flustered, began fishing in his pockets and after a few moments produced a large red silk handkerchief.

'Here,' he said. 'Blow your nose. And don't worry, Edi will be all right. I'll try to come back and - that is, I shouldn't interfere but -' He broke off, almost put the handkerchief away again and then seemed to remember he was supposed to be offering it to her.

Hannah took it and wiped her face. The fabric smelled of sea-salt, as if the man had just come from a beach. She wondered about that, but then, she wondered about the food, too. There seemed to be more of it than could possibly fit in the pocket it had come out of. Perhaps there *was* magic in the world. Or at least, failing that, real kindness. She risked a smile. The Doctor grinned back, but broadly, disconcertingly.

She looked down at the floor.

'So we're looking for a tall, blond man -' said the Doctor.

Hannah frowned. 'No, he was brown-haired. But tall, yes.'

'What did he say?'

'I've told you, that it was a sample -'

'No! *Exactly*. What - did - he - say?'

Hannah closed her eyes, struggled to remember. It had been more than six weeks ago after all. "It is a new thing, a cheap teddy bear for all children." I remember he said that.

And, “Everyone will have them soon, as soon as this blockade is over. We have set up factories everywhere.” He seemed quite confident.’

‘Unnaturally confident?’

Hannah shook her head. ‘No. It all seemed perfectly natural. It was only after -’ She shook her head. ‘It’s only now, that I think about it. Where will they build these factories?

There is nothing in Germany - things are so bad, it is all worn out. Yet he was talking as if they were already built.’ She paused, looked at the food on the table. Then looked up and met the Doctor’s eyes. ‘Perhaps he obtained his teddy bear in the same place as you obtained your food and medicine.’

The Doctor met her gaze. His mouth twitched slightly, and he nodded. He fished in his pocket and produced a brown paper bag, which he gave to her.

‘Give Edi three of these a day. I’ll try to bring some food from time to time.’ He was walking round the table, opening the window, clambering out. ‘I’ll leave it on the windowsill.’

And he was gone. Hannah hurried to the window, half-expecting him to have vanished; but he was walking down the street, twirling his umbrella and looking around him once more. She called after him, ‘What about Josef?’

The Doctor stopped walking, looked over his shoulder.

‘I’ll do my best,’ he said. ‘I’ll do my very best.’ Then he walked on.

But somehow, that was enough. Hannah closed the window before the cold draught could affect Edi, then slowly walked back to the bed and looked down at her child. The little girl was asleep, breathing evenly. The sores on her lips were smaller, and seemed less livid than they had even half an hour ago; better still, the lips were curled in a gentle, childish smile.

Hannah discovered that she believed in magic after all.

She began to cry.

The two private detectives had set themselves up on a small round table which was set near the main window of the *auberge*. Under pressure from Henri, they had revealed that they were American, and

were in the employ of a Scottish doctor who lived in Paris. They wouldn't say exactly what they were investigating, except that Gabrielle's disappearance was to do with it. They sat themselves down on the big table by the window, with their backs to the light, and questioned the wedding guests one by one, making their subjects sit facing the window. The negro woman, Forrester, asked most of the questions; the tall young man, whose name was Cwej, jotted the answers down in a lined notebook, occasionally glancing at Forrester.

It seemed like a lot of work to get very little information, thought Amalie. As she watched them from her chair by the fire, they ran through the same questions again and again.

The man - what had he looked like? Had anyone seen where he'd come from? Had anyone seen where he went? When -

in terms of how long before the service, how long before Gabrielle's disappearance - had he first been seen? Had anyone seen any unusual lights? Had the teddy bear seemed unusual in any way?

Those last two were the odd ones, thought Amalie blurrily. What were 'unusual lights'? And why did they need to know what the toy had looked like? It was just a toy. That's what she'd said. When pressed, she'd admitted that it had had brown fur. One of the children - Christine, she thought -

had said that the eyes had been green. She'd also said that they'd seemed to look at you, as if they were alive, but then children say silly things like that.

They were questioning Nadienne now. She hadn't seen the man, or the teddy bear, and was somewhat irritated by the questions. When they came to the question about the lights she scowled.

'What do you mean, "unusual lights"? What sort of unusual lights?'

'Anything out of the ordinary. Lightning, maybe.'

'Don't be ridiculous! How could there be any lightning?

There has been no thunderstorm! It's a motor car you should be looking for, or a horse and carriage.'

Forrester shrugged. 'That's what the police will be doing.

We don't need to do it as well.'

Nadienne stared at her for a moment, seemed about to get up, then said, ‘Wait a minute - there was that firework.’

Forrester and Cwej looked at each other, and Cwej scribbled something in his notebook.

‘My father hired a coach and four this morning, to take us from Larochepot to Septangy - he said a bride shouldn’t travel in a motor car, my dress would get dirty. Just as we came into town, the horses shied. I didn’t see anything, but the driver told me that a firework had frightened them.’

Forrester and Cwej exchanged another glance. Cwej began scribbling frantically. Forrester said simply, ‘What time?’

‘Ten minutes before we got to the church, I would guess.

Say ten to eleven.’

‘And what did the "firework" look like?’

‘I don’t know. I wasn’t looking out. I was - oh, you know, adjusting my veil, that sort of thing. And Papa was fussing.’

Amalie smiled, imagining the scene. But the two detectives remained deadpan. Forrester asked if the driver was around; Henri was called, and he in turn called Claude.

To no one’s surprise the coachman was staying at the auberge - it was, after all, the only place there was to stay in Septangy. He was summoned from his room where he’d been taking an afternoon nap, and appeared, rubbing sleep from his eyes and looking irritated. He was still wearing the blue frock-coat and footman’s breeches he had worn in the morning, but had dispensed with the top hat.

‘American investigators?’ he asked loudly. ‘What do the Americans think we have done now? I thought they were on our side.’

Henri explained that it was nothing to do with the war, and the man was persuaded to sit down at the table with Cwej and Forrester.

‘Yes, there was a firework,’ he told them. ‘The light was so bright it frightened the horses.’

‘What colour was it?’ asked Forrester.

Amalie frowned. They asked some very strange questions, these two.

Why all this fuss about a firework anyway?

The coachman evidently thought so too. His voice was puzzled as he said, ‘I don’t know - every colour. It was only a sort of flash.’

‘You didn’t hear the explosion?’

The man shook his head.

Suddenly, Cwej leaned forward. ‘Did you see anyone walking about afterwards? A tall man, with a top hat, for instance?’

Suddenly Amalie had it. This ‘firework’ wasn’t a firework at all. It was something to do with the method that the stranger had used to take Gabrielle away. Perhaps he had hidden her with mirrors, she thought, the way magicians do.

She shook her head. It didn’t make sense. It didn’t make sense at all.

The coachman was saying, ‘... one of the wedding guests. I remember the top hat, and I thought, "He’s going to be late." But I could hardly offer him a lift!’

‘And this was just after you saw the firework?’ asked Forrester.

‘It must have been; he was on the corner of the street by the de Mouvilles’ house.’

Forrester nodded. Amalie noticed that Cwej was no longer writing anything in his notebook, but was leaning back, looking over his shoulder out of the window.

They’ve found what they came for, she thought. She watched as they dismissed the coachman and stood up, then as Forrester walked over to her.

‘You will be able to find her?’ she asked, before the American woman could speak.

Dark eyes met hers. ‘I hope so.’

Helpless, Amalie felt the tears start. ‘You’ll let me know?

You’ll come back and tell me, whatever happens?’

Forrester nodded, extended a hand. ‘It’s a deal.’

Something in her voice convinced Amalie. Whatever James said, she thought, there were some people who could be trusted, regardless of the colour of their skin or the country of their birth. She took the extended hand, let Forrester shake it. 'Thank you,' she said to her. 'Thank you from the bottom of my heart.' Then she hugged the woman; but to her surprise encountered something hard, like metal or wood, beneath the woollen sweater. She withdrew, puzzled.

'Bullet-proof vest,' said Forrester, grinning. 'You never know who you're going to meet in this business.' She turned and walked to the door. Cwej followed her. In the doorway she looked over her shoulder, said, 'Well, thanks for your help, everyone.'

Henri started to say something, but the pair were gone.

Amalie put her face to the window and watched them down the street. They were running, which for some reason didn't surprise her.

She knew that she was going to have to stay in Septangy until they came back. She decided to ask Claude about rooms at the *auberge* for the time being. Henri would invite her to stay, of course, and also Nadienne and Jean-Pierre, when they came to live in Larochepot after their honeymoon.

But she didn't want that. She wanted to sit at this window, in this bar, with a glass of armagnac in her hand, and watch the street, and wait.

Until they came back. Until they told her what had happened to Gabrielle.

Until they told her why she would never see her daughter again.

In a quiet orchard a few kilometres from Septangy, the rain dripped from the trees on to a dull blue box. From a distance, it might have been mistaken for a disused agricultural implement: an upended seed hopper, perhaps. Closer to, the English word POLICE could be seen printed on it, in neat white lettering along the top, followed by other, smaller words.

A woman jogged through the orchard, just as the light was fading. She wore false leather springerboots, which might have been mistaken by a twentieth-century person for leather riding boots. She wore laserproofed trousers, which to any twentieth-century person would just have looked shiny and rather baggy. She wore a red woollen sweater, which looked as if it was of authentic 1914 manufacture, though it wasn't, and it had a few unusual energy sources beneath it

which would make that fact quite clear to a properly trained observer.

The young man watching from the shadows, though strictly speaking of the twentieth century himself, was a properly trained observer. He knew there was something different about the woman, and about the blue box.

Something dangerous. Something which threatened everything that he now believed in.

The woman stopped by the blue box, waited, looking anxiously around her. After a moment a tall young man jogged up beside her. His costume - a formal morning suit -

looked more authentic than hers, but the watcher was not fooled.

He waited. After several minutes, during which the woman and the man joshed each other in the manner of comrades-in-arms everywhere, a door opened in the blue box, and a man came out. He was a short man, wearing a white suit and shiny two-tone brogues. He carried an umbrella - black and white, with a bright red handle in the shape of a question mark. But he didn't bother to open it, despite the steady rain.

The woman gestured back the way she had come, perhaps suggesting that the man follow her. Her companion, the tall man, evidently agreed with her, and even started to lead the way.

But the small man shook his head and prodded the ground with his umbrella. He was speaking with emphasis, loud enough for the watcher to hear occasional words:

'unalterable' and 'return' were the two which were repeated most often. There was also a name: Bernice. The watcher made a note of it, in case it came in useful.

Eventually, the woman and the tall man seemed to give in, and walked through the open door of the box. The strange-looking man glanced around the orchard, squinting directly towards the bushes where the watcher was hidden, then - after a pause - he shook his head and followed them through the door. There didn't seem to be enough space in the box for the three of them, but the watcher had some idea about why that might be.

After another short interval, the light on the top of the box flashed, and, with a loud roaring noise, it slowly disappeared.

Any twentieth-century person ought to have thought it impossible. But the young man watching wasn't concerned with the apparent impossibilities. He was only concerned with the facts. He slithered out of the low hedge where he had been concealed and briefly massaged his chilled limbs to get the circulation back into them. Then walked to the middle of the orchard and examined the squashed grass where the blue box had stood.

The teddy-bear badge on his lapel shimmered, the two green eyes glowed like tiny stars. The young man glanced once more around the orchard.

Then, with a flicker of rainbow light, he vanished.

Chapter 3

25 September 1919

'Bernice Summerfield? I can't say that I've heard the name.'

Mrs Charlotte Sutton looked up from her book and saw two blurry figures through her reading spectacles, one of them recognizable as her daughter Carrie, the other less distinct, the white blob of a face above a yellow dress, a stranger.

'Oh, I'm sorry my dear,' she said quickly. 'I didn't realize you were actually standing there.'

'Don't mention it,' said the stranger. 'There are days when I haven't heard of me either.'

'You wouldn't have heard of her, Mother,' said Carrie blithely. 'Benny and I only met just today.'

Mrs Sutton raised her spectacles so that she could see the newcomer more clearly. She seemed a smart enough woman, slim and flat-chested in the current fashion. Her black hair was cut short - very short indeed, it was barely visible under her yellow cloche hat. Her face wore a warm smile with just a trace of diffidence as she stepped forward and extended a hand. Mrs Sutton took it, felt her own hand gripped firmly and briskly shaken. A confident woman, then; modern, but not that young - perhaps a little over thirty. Her hands were ringless, Mrs Sutton noticed. No husband, no fiancé lost in the war

then. Or perhaps she was simply trying to put it all behind her.

Mrs Sutton became aware that Carrie was still speaking.

She spoke rapidly and at length, as usual, her eyes roving all around the place as if looking for a target for her stray words.

Mrs Sutton had long ago learned to listen only to those parts of her daughter's conversation which were likely to be relevant, or at least interesting.

'... is really quite an expert on the subject of spiritualism,'

Carrie was now saying. 'She's attended séances in London and Paris! She's had such fantastic experiences, you wouldn't believe them all! Go on, tell her about it, Benny.'

'Benny' smiled slightly. 'It's certainly been interesting,'

she said, but didn't elaborate.

Mrs Sutton decided that she was going to rather like this person. She put her book down on the arm of her chair and stood up. 'You are attending our séance this evening, then, with Madame Ségovie?'

The younger woman inclined her head. 'I was hoping that I could - that is, if I won't be intruding. Your daughter tells me that you haven't attended a séance before, and I realize that it's a private matter.'

'Nonsense, Miss Summerfield! I would not have excluded a new friend of my daughter's from a family gathering when my son and my husband were still alive, and now that they're dead I don't see that it makes any difference.'

Again Miss Summerfield inclined her head and smiled.

'Thanks,' she said simply, then hesitated, as if there were something more but she wasn't quite sure whether she should say it.

Mrs Sutton looked down into the fireplace for a moment, then asked quietly, 'Is there someone whom you are trying to

- that is, should I ask Madame Ségovie -?'

Miss Summerfield shook her head. An expression of sadness crossed her face, quickly suppressed and turned into an ironic smile. 'I don't think Madame Ségovie could find the people I'm looking for, Mrs

Sutton.'

'Oh, I'm sure Madame Ségovie could find anyone!'

exclaimed Carrie. She was standing by the window, one curtain in her hand, staring out at the damp November garden. 'She's such an expert, Benny - she knows all the best operators. And she doesn't make a fuss about it like some of them do. You know, all that ectoplasm. She says she doesn't need it. She's ever so clever! Why, last week at Mrs Fox's she found Charles and Daddy for me - and even Uncle Neville, and he's been dead for years! And Charles spoke to me, too, though he had to use Madame Ségovie's voice.'

Mrs Sutton met Miss Summerfield's eyes, and they both gave the tiniest of smiles. Mrs Sutton felt better: the younger woman, for all her 'fantastic experiences', was clearly sceptical, and that might be no bad thing tonight.

'Well, you must stay for afternoon tea, then, Miss Summerfield,' she said.

'Thanks, I'd love it,' said the younger woman. 'I'll be much better prepared to meet the dead after a slice of madeira cake and a cup of Earl Grey.'

Manda came down to tea, which pleased Mrs Sutton. Her younger daughter had been looking pale and ill for the last few days, and had spent most of her time in bed, refusing to attend school. She still looked pale in her red dress, and she carried her ridiculous old teddy bear, Frederick, as if he would somehow defend her from growing up. Mrs Sutton occasionally thought of telling Manda that she was sixteen now, not a little girl any more, and too old to bring teddy bears to the tea table; but the girl had lost a brother and a father within a few months. She needed her defences, and Mrs Sutton wasn't about to take them away from her.

Manda plonked Frederick in the empty chair, as she always did, then sat down next to Benny who was already nibbling a slice of chocolate cake. Carrie, on her other side, was chattering to her young man, Roger, who had also been invited to tea and séance. He sat there in his bank clerk's suit, looking rather bored. Ginny, the maid, hovered in the background, in case anyone wanted more tea.

'Do you think they're all fakes?' asked Manda of Benny, suddenly and rather loudly, adding as if by way of apology,

‘Carrie says you’ve been to an awful lot of séances.’

Benny glanced up at Mrs Sutton, who smiled slightly and raised her cup of tea to her lips, as an indication that the younger woman didn’t have to worry about offending her and could say what she liked.

‘Well, I don’t think I can say that they’re all fakes,’ she said. ‘Because I haven’t seen them all. I think it’s best to approach each session with an open mind.’

Manda nodded solemnly. ‘Carrie believes all of it, don’t you, Carrie?’

‘I’m sorry, Manda? Oh - séances - yes, I think it’s wonderful. Madame Ségovie is ever so clever. Why, last week she spoke to - ’

‘Mummy doesn’t believe it, do you, Mummy?’ interrupted Manda.

Mrs Sutton thought about it for a moment, looked at Benny, who studiously concentrated on her slice of cake.

Carefully she said: ‘I believe that Charles and Daddy are in the care of God. But whether Madame Ségovie can speak to them whilst they are in His care, well, that’s another matter. Like Miss Summerfield, I’m prepared to keep an open mind.’

‘Quite,’ said Roger. ‘I agree, Mrs Sutton.’

Mrs Sutton glanced at him; he seemed perfectly sincere.

Was he still trying to impress her, as a potential son-inlaw?

She had thought he was getting tired of Carrie - most young men did after a few weeks. But perhaps his dull conventionality and her fluttering distractedness made a good combination at some level. Perhaps this time it would last.

Mrs Sutton hoped it would. Carrie would be happier married.

And there were so few young men left, after the war.

‘I don’t think you should keep an open mind at all,’

Manda was saying. ‘Not when anyone can see she’s a fake.’

She turned to Benny again. ‘She kicks the table. I’ve seen her do it. She did it at Mrs Fox’s last week, but nobody believed me when I told them.’

Benny grinned. ‘Perhaps she just gets frustrated when the spirits don’t want to talk to her.’ She smiled and gestured at the teddy bear. ‘May we be introduced?’

Mrs Sutton knew a change of subject when she heard one, and was duly grateful. Manda submitted gracefully enough, introducing Frederick and letting Benny shake paws.

Benny asked how old he was, which Mrs Sutton thought a rather ingenious question, since it led to more - whether he had a birthday, what presents he got, and so on. Manda was thoroughly distracted, and even began to get a little colour in her cheeks.

The child shouldn’t be so morbid, thought Mrs Sutton.

But then she had been so fond of Charles, so shocked by his death just when she had been expecting him home any week

- and then, when she had at last begun to recover from that, she had been the one to find her father’s body, purple-faced, sprawled across the floor in the living-room.

Mrs Sutton could still hear her shouting, crying as she sat at the bottom of the stairs that dreadful night. ‘There isn’t any God! God wouldn’t do this to us!’

There isn’t any God. Sometimes Mrs Sutton found herself wondering about that, too. First her son, then her husband. Surely the God she had believed in since she was a child - vast, comforting, all-knowing and all-powerful

- wouldn’t have let this happen to her?

‘The rat of doubt gnawing at the foundations of your faith’

- that’s what Mr Upton, the curate, had called it, when she’d spoken to him about it. He’d said it was only natural in the circumstances, and had recommended prayer, and the healing course of time. But he didn’t have a frightened, angry, disbelieving daughter to console. And he didn’t have another daughter - she glanced at Carrie, now chattering amiably to Roger - who was silly enough to invite a charlatan spiritualist to the house, and involve Manda in a charade of table-knocking and the Other Side just when she had begun to get interested in life again. Mrs Sutton knew she should have forbidden it; but the rat of doubt had whispered to her, had said, *Wouldn’t you like to prove it? Wouldn’t you like to be sure? Wouldn’t you like to talk to*

them? And she had invited Madame Ségovie into her house.

Mrs Sutton wondered if anyone had seen the shadow of that doubt crossing her face just now, when she had said that George and Charles were in God's care. Manda hadn't seemed to; but Benny - yes, Benny had seen it. There had been a flicker of the eyes, an acknowledgement. That's the trouble with inviting perceptive people to tea, thought Mrs Sutton. They're likely to perceive things when you're not sure that you want them to. But she was still glad that Benny was there.

Manda and the young woman were now deep in conversation, as if they were old friends. Manda was telling Benny all about the different types of teddy bears there were, and where they came from, and who had given them to her.

She had quite a collection upstairs; she called it 'the Zoo'.

She'd started it before Charles's death but it had been greatly augmented since then. She talked about it a lot, though none of the other bears meant quite as much to her as old Frederick.

Suddenly Manda stood up. 'May Benny and I be excused, Mummy? I'd like to show her the Zoo.'

Mrs Sutton nodded, but looked at the untouched slice of cake and glass of milk in front of her daughter. 'You must take your tea with you, though, and make sure you eat it.'

She was looking sidelong at Benny as she spoke; the younger woman gave a slight nod.

Manda was away, taking her glass but leaving her plate behind. Benny picked it up and followed her, grinning over her shoulder at Carrie, who gave her a little wave and went on talking to Roger.

Mrs Sutton wondered briefly what the confident young woman saw in Carrie; then she remembered that they'd only met today, and decided that Benny was probably more interested in the séance than in her daughter. Perhaps, despite her apparent scepticism, she too was searching for some kind of confirmation. Something to believe in. Perhaps she *had* lost someone in the war.

I don't think you'll find them tonight, thought Mrs Sutton.

But I wish you luck, my dear. I wish you luck.

* * *

If Mrs Sutton hadn't already been inclined to regard Madame Ségovie as a fraud, then her extraordinary costume would have aroused at least a few suspicions. She wore a sleeveless jacket and baggy trousers made of a silvery, almost luminous, artificial silk, a purple velveteen waistcoat and matching ankle-trim, gold shoes and - most incredible of all - a gold silk turban knotted up with a large bow over her left ear. She completed the effect with a monocle and a long, black cigarette holder. She lit up her cigarette as she came into the sitting-room, filling the air with the pungency of Turkish tobacco.

'Zis room has ze *atmosphere*,' she announced, in a French accent so evidently false that Mrs Sutton almost laughed. She then wandered around, peering at the photographs of Charles and George on the mantle, the cushions and antimacassars on the chair and the sofa, the curtains, the lamps, and the all-important circular table, where the other guests were already seated. She briefly said hello to Carrie and Manda, and was introduced to Roger and to Benny. She shook hands with both of them, blew smoke in their faces. Then she walked over to the small bar laid out on the dresser. She glanced at Mrs Sutton. 'May I?'

'Certainly,' said Mrs Sutton, stepping forward. 'Allow me.'

But Madame Ségovie was already pouring herself a large whisky. A very large whisky. 'Zis helps with ze concentration,' she explained, before downing it in one gulp.

Benny, Mrs Sutton noticed, was watching the spiritualist closely, though from the corner of her eye and without seeming to. She was also talking to Manda; or rather Manda was talking to her, apparently still on the subject of teddy bears. Mrs Sutton could only admire her guest's patience.

She sat down on Benny's other side, between her and the seat reserved for Madame Ségovie. Roger and Carrie, opposite her, already had their hands on the table, palms down but none the less discreetly touching.

Perhaps they will get married, thought Mrs Sutton. I hope so.

Carrie moved her hand a fraction away from Roger's: perhaps she had noticed the direction of her mother's stare.

'We're ready,' she said.

Ah, but I am not, alas,' said Madame Ségovie. She crouched down and looked under the table, with a muttered, *Pardonnez-moi*; then stood up and nodded at Ginny, who was standing by the door. 'If you could turn off ze electric lights now, *s'il vous plait*.' She made the last phrase sound like 'silver plate'. Mrs Sutton caught Benny's eye; the younger woman grinned and shook her head.

The maid switched off the lights and left the room. Mrs Sutton found a moment to wonder what the girl made of it all.

Probably she thought it was 'hocus-pocus'. Probably she was right.

Madame Ségovie, her position marked by the red glow of her cigarette, took her place at the table. Everyone put their hands palm-down on the polished surface. Manda whispered,

'Benny, do you think teddy bears have souls?'

Madame Ségovie coughed. 'If I could have a few moments of zilence, please,' she said. 'I need to concentrate at zis time.'

The 'zilence' stretched. Mrs Sutton heard Carrie whisper something, felt Madame Ségovie's hand touch hers and withdraw. She felt her heart beat faster and realized that, despite Madame Ségovie's manifestly false French accent and her incredible clothes, she was still expecting something to happen. Something that would prove the unprovable, chase the shadow of doubt away.

There was a faint rustling sound, then three firm raps on the table. Mrs Sutton remembered what Manda had said about Madame Ségovie kicking the table. But it hadn't sounded like that.

'Hello, Klondike,' said Madame Ségovie suddenly, in a booming, theatrical voice, then added in a conversational tone, 'Klondike says hello. He is my usual control, one of ze most reliable of ze operators.'

'The one I told you about!' hissed Carrie. He's ever so clever! He's the one that got Charles for us last week! He's a gold miner and he got killed in -'

There was another rap on the table. Mrs Sutton smiled to herself; even ghosts, it appeared, felt the need to silence Carrie. But underneath her amusement, she felt a deep and final sense of disappointment. Like Madame Ségovie herself, all this was so obviously ridiculous. A gold miner, with a name like Klondike! No doubt the rapping on the table was some kind of sleight-of-hand (or foot), made easy by the darkness.

No doubt Madame Ségovie would try some funny voices in a moment, but it would take more than that to restore Mrs Sutton's faith in the séance now.

'Zere is a stranger here - a foreigner, Klondike says.'

'That's me, I expect,' said Benny. 'I've travelled a lot, so he probably thinks I'm foreign.'

There was a pause, then Madame Ségovie said, 'It is not possible! Are you sure?' Another pause. 'He says that ze foreigner is - not of zis world. She should not be here.'

Mrs Sutton frowned. She wished that there was some light, so that she could see Benny's face. It was clear that Madame Ségovie was trying to discredit Benny. Perhaps Benny was an investigator, someone who set out to uncover fake mediums, and that Madame Ségovie suspected this.

'Do you want me to leave?' Benny's voice, quiet, calm.

'No,' said Mrs Sutton, quickly, before the medium could ask the opinion of 'Klondike' in the matter. 'I want her to stay.

If nothing happens, then nothing happens. But I'd like Mr -

um - Klondike to at least try to speak to Charles.'

There were two raps on the table. 'That means yes,' said Carrie. 'He'll try it.'

Another rap on the table, then a long silence. Benny's hand touched Mrs Sutton's briefly, as if in reassurance.

Suddenly there was a violent series of raps. The table shuddered and swayed, and Madame Ségovie gasped.

'Zomething is wrong! I've found - zat is, Klondike's found -

oh!'

Mrs Sutton opened her mouth to speak, but before she could find words there was a blinding flash of light and she was pushed back from the table, over the top of her chair, and on to the carpet with enough force to knock the breath from her. Someone landed on top of her, then jumped aside.

She became aware of the smell of smoke.

‘What’s happening?’ she shouted, but her voice was dim and muzzy in her ears.

Abruptly, the lights came on. She saw Benny, standing by the switches, her mouth working. But Mrs Sutton couldn’t hear the words, only a muffled shouting that seemed to be coming from another room. Carrie was standing at the table, evidently screaming, but Mrs Sutton couldn’t hear that either, only a faint, distant wailing that might have been a ghost.

I’m deaf, she thought. Whatever’s happened has deafened me.

She looked for Manda, saw her sitting in her chair, but her chair was on the far side of the room and the girl’s face was smudged with charcoal. Mrs Sutton ran over to her, put her hands on the girl’s shoulders.

‘Can you hear me?’ she shouted.

Manda nodded, mouthed something, then turned and shouted to someone else - Mrs Sutton could just make out the words ‘She can’t hear’.

‘I can hear!’ bawled Mrs Sutton. ‘But not very well. Is anyone else hurt? What happened?’

Silence. The door burst open, and Ginny appeared, wide-eyed. Mrs Sutton pushed Manda towards her, said,

‘Keep her with you.’

The maid said something; Mrs Sutton caught the words

‘... fire brigade?’ She frowned, looked over her shoulder. Only then did she see the char-blackened hole in the middle of her table. It was more than two feet across, and the edges of it were still smouldering. Madame Ségovie was rolling on the floor near the table, her hands to her ears, blood trickling from her nose. Benny was standing over her, shouting something. As Mrs Sutton watched, the young woman slapped the medium’s face, hard.

If this was some sort of spiritualist’s fakery that had gone wrong -

She turned back to the maid. ‘No, but telephone the police station. Ask

them to send someone as soon as they can.' As she spoke, Mrs Sutton became aware that she could hear her own voice again. She could also hear Benny, shouting at Madame Ségovie.

'You've got to tell me now! What did you see?'

'It were impossible, ma'am.' A weak voice, just audible to Mrs Sutton's recovering ears. It was a very long way from the fake accent of Madame Ségovie; it sounded more as if it belonged in the East End of London. 'I 'ad nothing to do with it - I couldn't stop it, I swear!'

'What - did - you - see?' Benny pulled the medium upright, held her so that their faces were only about a foot apart.

'A battlefield. It were - it was - ' Quite abruptly, the woman recovered her French accent. 'Mud, mud, everyzing was covered in mud. And zere were bodies - and falling lights

- and aeroplanes, very big ones, flying very fast.'

To Mrs Sutton's amazement, Benny nodded slowly, as if none of this were particularly unexpected.

'Did you see any people?' she asked the medium.

'Zere were people. Two of zem. And zomething -

summat looked like a bear, but all dressed up.' Her accent was gone again. Mrs Sutton found herself feeling sorry for the woman; it was quite clear that, whatever had happened, she genuinely hadn't been in control of it.

Benny let the medium go; the woman sat down heavily in her chair. 'Well done,' said Benny. 'Sorry I slapped you. Do you feel better now?'

Madame Ségovie nodded. 'But it's all going blurry, like.'

'It will,' said Benny. 'Experiences induced by psychic resonance tend to fade quickly. They're like dreams.'

Madame Ségovie turned to Mrs Sutton, said, 'I saw yer son. I saw Charles. 'E was right in the middle of it.'

Mrs Sutton felt a twisting in her gut. 'Are you sure?' she said. 'You're not making it up?'

'No, ma'am, no, I wouldn't make none of it up, it were real. I could

tell 'im from 'is photo.'

Mrs Sutton looked around the room, at Carrie and Roger clinging on to each other by the fireplace, at Madame Ségovie, bloodied and frightened, staring at her, at Benny, who was crouched over the wreck of the table, examining the burned area with something that looked like a small electric torch. She felt her body freeze, and the room seemed to spin around her as she put the chain of facts together: Madame Ségovie had been trying to contact Charles on the Other Side; she had found a terrible battlefield; the battlefield was real, real enough for a shell that exploded there to blast a two-foot hole in her best card table; and Madame Ségovie had seen Charles there.

'God forgive me,' she whispered slowly. 'Charles must be in Hell.'

Then her legs gave way beneath her, and she collapsed on to the carpet.

'Take her pulse! Take her pulse!'

Mrs Sutton knew that she could only have been unconscious for a few moments, for she was still on the carpet and she could still smell the smoke in the air. A ring of faces looked down at her. Benny still had the torch-like thing in her hand; Mrs Sutton could see a blue light flashing, very quickly, somewhere inside it. Carrie was twittering away to Roger, something about a doctor. Ginny and Manda had returned. Ginny had a hand to her mouth, and it was Manda who was saying, 'Take her pulse!'

'I'm all right,' she tried to say, but it came out as a dry croak. She cleared her throat, tried again. 'I'm all right. It was just the shock.' She started to sit up, but Benny put a hand against her shoulder, gently but firmly.

'I wouldn't if I were you. Give yourself a minute or two.'

Mrs Sutton felt a new wave of weakness pass through her as Benny spoke; she lay back, heard Benny speaking through a ringing in her ears. 'Now everyone else stand back and let her get some air - or better still, leave the room. I'll make sure that she's all right.'

There was a scuffling of feet, and the sound of Carrie talking, both slowly fading away. At last the door shut and there was silence.

Mrs Sutton became aware that she was feeling sick. A hand took hers, another pushed a cushion behind her head.

Thus supported, she could see Benny, kneeling on the carpet. The younger woman's eyes met hers, waited.

Finally Benny said, 'Charles isn't in Hell.'

Mrs Sutton managed a smile. 'No, of course not. I was being silly. I can see it now; that terrible woman is a charlatan. I'm very grateful to you for exposing her.' She paused. She knew that what she was saying didn't even begin to describe the truth - charlatans can't burn two foot holes in card tables - but for now she just wanted it over with.

'I don't know what I would have done without you here,' she finished lamely.

But Benny was shaking her head. 'It isn't that simple.' It was her turn to pause. She lowered her eyes for a moment, then raised them again. 'Actually, Charles isn't dead.'

Mrs Sutton felt her stomach clench again, closed her eyes. It wasn't possible. God couldn't do this to her. No one could do this to her. She shook her head weakly. 'No, Benny, please.'

It's true,' said Benny simply. 'They didn't find his body, did they? Just a hole in the ground. And the same for Sergeant John Betts, Corporal Robert Dale and Private David Stringer. And Gefreite Hans Göth and Gefreite Reinhardt Perelmann from the German side.'

Mrs Sutton frowned and felt her face prickle as blood returned to the skin. 'Who are you?' she asked at last.

Benny looked down at her lap for a moment, then shrugged. 'Let's just say I'm a sort of - investigator. Some friends and I are investigating a sort of crime.' She paused. 'A big crime. If we succeed, we might be able to get Charles back. Alive.'

Mrs Sutton frowned again, cautiously propped herself upright. Met Benny's eyes. 'No, my dear,' she said. 'That isn't good enough. If my son is involved, I want the whole truth.'

Benny hesitated, looked away. 'You wouldn't believe it.'

There was a long pause. Mrs Sutton thought about it, thought about Madame Ségovie's frightened face, Benny slapping it, Benny asking the questions.

'It's real, isn't it?' she asked after a while. 'That is, it's not

- supernatural.' Unexpectedly, Benny grinned. 'Well,' she said, 'sometimes I wonder about that myself.' And then she told her.

The police constable had brought with him into the sitting room a whiff of the outside, of wet leaves and coal smoke.

His face, his cape and his helmet were plastered with moisture: Mrs Sutton supposed it must be drizzling again.

'And you're quite sure you don't want us to charge this - um -

this lady?' The constable glanced at Madame Ségovie, who looked down at her lap, her face flushing with embarrassment.

Mrs Sutton managed a composed smile. 'No, not at all.

In fact Madame Ségovie offered to pay for a new table, and I refused her offer. I cannot see how she can be held responsible for the more -' she glanced at Benny, who gave her the shadow of a wink '- the more unexpected aspects of the spirit world.'

'Well - um -' the constable gave Madame Ségovie a venomous glance. 'You understand that if there are any further incidents of this kind, we will most definitely be investigating them.'

'I should think so too!' said Carrie from the back of the room. 'Really, Mummy, I don't see why we can't -'

'It was not Madame Ségovie's fault, Carrie,' said Mrs Sutton quickly. 'What she does is in itself quite harmless.

Miss Summerfield has explained to me what happened to us tonight; it was not under Madame Ségovie's control at at all.'

'Well, Benny, you might have told me about it as well,'

sulked Carrie.

The policeman glared at Benny, who returned his gaze evenly.

'That will be all, Constable,' said Mrs Sutton firmly. 'I'm sorry that we have taken up so much of your time.'

The constable looked around the room, clearly annoyed.

'I'd better be getting on, then,' he muttered. Mrs Sutton knew what he was thinking: a nice, well-off family, being taken in by a patent

trickster. She would have thought it herself, not more than an hour ago. Until Benny had explained.

Even now she wasn't sure that she could believe it.

Thought-transference. Beings that looked like animals, yet had the intelligence and motivation of men. Travelling to other worlds, and other times. Wars on other worlds, like enough to the wars of Earth that the 'psychic resonance'

between them could have physical effects. It all sounded as improbable as magic, something out of a scientific romance; a nonsense. But if it were true then Charles was alive. Really alive. Not on the Other Side, not in Hell, nor even in Heaven, but just on a battlefield, a place where he had no business being, and from which he could possibly, just possibly, be brought back. So

Mrs Sutton had decided to believe it, for the time being.

She stood up and followed the policeman into the hall.

As she'd expected, as soon as the door to the sitting-room was closed he leaned towards her and said quietly, 'Are you quite sure you don't want to press charges, Mrs Sutton? It could be done very discreetly, y'know.'

Mrs Sutton shook her head, thanked him, let him go. She heard the sitting-room door open, turned to find Benny standing in the hall, taking her coat from the rack.

'You could stay the night here, if you wish,' she told the younger woman. 'You could have Charles's room.'

But Benny shook her head. 'I have to report to my friend.

He'll worry about me if I don't turn up. But I promise I'll be back, as soon as I can. Tomorrow, I hope.' She was pulling her coat on as she spoke.

Before she could leave, Mrs Sutton went up to her and took her hands. 'It is true, isn't it? Charles is still alive?'

Benny glanced at the partly open door of the sitting-room, nodded, squeezed both Mrs Sutton's hands. Then she let go and left, closing the front door behind her.

Mrs Sutton turned, was about to go back into the sitting-room when she saw that there was someone standing at the top of the stairs: Manda. She was still wearing her red dress, still clutching Frederick.

'I heard that,' said Manda, then before Mrs Sutton could reply she turned her face to the teddy bear's. 'Why is Mummy so gullible, Frederick? Why doesn't she realize that Charles is dead, that Daddy is dead, that nothing, nothing, *nothing*'s going to bring them back. Not *ever*.'

'Manda!' called Mrs Sutton, but her daughter ignored her and ran out of sight, along the landing. Mrs Sutton heard the familiar creaking of the boards as she went into her bedroom, heard the door slam. She stood still for a moment, thinking about Mr Upton's rat of doubt, and why she believed Benny, and whether she should go to comfort her daughter and if so how she should go about it. But before she could sort out her thoughts, the sitting-room door opened wide and Carrie, Roger and Madame Ségovie stepped out. Carrie was carrying a brown paper package in her arms.

'Where's Manda?' she asked.

'In her room,' said Mrs Sutton, thankful to be relieved of the task of comforting her daughter, and aware that Carrie, for all her silliness - or perhaps because of her silliness -

would probably be able to do it better.

Carrie pounded up the stairs, shouting, 'Manda! Manda!'

A muffled voice responded.

'I've got another teddy for your collection, dear - I got him at Maples this morning. I forgot all about him with Benny and Madame Ségovie and all the excitement. He's ever so cute, he's got such lovely green eyes, you're sure to love him to bits!'

Chapter 4

Josef woke up feeling cold. He usually felt cold in the mornings, because the engine shed wasn't heated any more than it needed to be. There was only so much fuel in the world, and there were more important things to do with it than keeping people warm in their sleep. At least, that was what Sergeant Gebauer told them.

Footsteps echoing on stone told him that the sergeant was on his way round the floor. Josef hastily pulled back the blanket and struggled out of his bunk on to the metal ladder that led to the ground. As he made his way down past the middle bunk he tapped Ingrid on the shoulder. Wide blue eyes opened and stared at him, fuzzy with sleep.

'Wake-up time!' said Josef. Ingrid nodded, brushed her hair back from her forehead, scratched at one of the red training scars there. Josef heard her getting out of her bunk as .he jumped to the ground.

The bottom bunk was empty. Julius wasn't there to be woken up any more. Josef supposed he was dead, though no one actually told you when that happened. Sergeant Gebauer would only say that Julius had been 'reassigned'.

Josef stretched, looked around. He couldn't see the sergeant, but figures were climbing or jumping down from their bunks along the length of the wall, pulling on clothes, making their way between piles of rusting spare parts and wooden ammunition cases towards the dim light of the engine pit. Josef could already see steam billowing under the roof of the pit, could hear the hiss of the engines below. The non-humans, the Ajeesks and Kreetas who lived on the other side of the shed and had their own sergeants, must already be stoking up. Josef decided he'd better get moving. The sergeant wouldn't like it if the humans were last out again.

He padded to the cupboard at the end of the trio of bunks, pulled open the door and began putting on his clothes. He would have liked to wash first but there was no time, and anyway no water. There was only washing water in the evenings, and then only a bucketful for each trio.

By the time Sergeant Gebauer reached him he had his trousers and boots on, and was fastening his jacket. Ingrid, still in her night shirt and barely awake, pulled her blanket around herself. Gebauer was tall and blond; he had a fast, nervous walk that was in itself frightening. Without stopping he nodded to Josef, glanced at Ingrid in her blanket and snapped, 'Hurry up!' Then he was gone.

Ingrid let out a breath. 'That was lucky. I could have been on report.'

'Gebauer isn't so bad,' said Josef. 'Reeder is worse.'

Ingrid had arrived a few weeks after Josef, and he often spoke like that to her, advising her, though she was a year older than him and, after three months' service, knew as well as he did what went on in

the barracks.

He remembered Ingrid's predecessor in the middle bunk, the Turkish boy with the strange name and the mobile, inquisitive face. He, like Julius, had been 'reassigned'. Josef tried to work out how many of the engine drivers and stokers had been reassigned since he had arrived, but quickly lost count. It was better not to think about it, he decided. He fastened the top button on his jacket, ran a finger round his collar to make sure it was straight, then set off across the stone floor towards the engine pit.

By the time he reached the top of the ladder, most of the non-humans' engines were away, blue-and-brown metal boxes jostling for position in a cloud of steam by the east door. Josef quickly scrambled down to the muddy floor of the pit and the engines assigned to the humans.

The machines were the life and purpose of the sheds. As far as Josef was concerned, they were the purpose of his existence. There were twenty of them, each about five metres high and ten long. Inside the shed, they rested on their wheels; their legs were folded up against their sides, ready for use in crossing the trenches. Josef walked up to the machine with the identity number TY-3. He'd had this machine ever since he'd come out of training; he was used to it, liked it, sometimes thought of it as his friend.

He walked around the machine, checking the folded metal legs, the pivot-wheels, the pistons, the valves, and the sides of the boiler for any signs of rust or cracking. There was a little mud caked around the lower joints of the legs and the bottom of the boiler, but that was all right. Even the sergeants admitted that there were limits to how clean you could expect anything to be, given the conditions of the war. 'As long as it works,' Gebauer would say. 'As long as you can fight with it, that's all that matters.'

Ingrid arrived with the breakfast things just as he was climbing into the cab. She put the food on top of the firebox, hanging on to the open door so that there was light for Josef to see whilst he lit the fire. He took an igniter from the rack, pulled the pin, dropped it into the firebox and slammed the door. After a moment, there was a muffled thud; the whole engine shook. He opened the grille on the firebox, felt the welcome warmth seep out as the liquid fuel blazed up. He moved aside so that Ingrid could get into the cab and close the door.

With the door shut, the only light in the tiny cab came from the firebox grille. But Josef didn't need to see to find the familiar driving

controls. He pulled down the damping lever on the boiler, clicked open the periscope lens. Immediately, several gauges lit up dimly in front of him. The most important at the moment was the boiler pressure gauge. He watched it climb whilst listening to the sizzling of his breakfast on the top of the firebox. After a while, he heard Ingrid turning the chops over, and cracking the shells of the eggs.

'Ow!'

Josef didn't glance up from the pressure gauge. 'Cut your finger on the shell again?' he asked, teasingly.

'No. Burned it on the hot top.' Ingrid always called the firebox lid the hot top; Josef didn't know why. It was something from her previous life, she said. But, when Josef asked, she admitted that she wasn't too sure what her previous life had been, and looked uncomfortable.

Perhaps, thought Josef, she had been a footsoldier. That would be enough to make anyone ashamed. But then, of course, he might have been a footsoldier. There was no way of being sure, not when they took away your memory every time to make room for the new training. It was best to concentrate on the present. You were less likely to get killed that way.

The needle of the pressure gauge was almost on the line now. Through the thick armour-plating, Josef could hear the rumble as the other engines began to move off. He pressed his left eye to the periscope, saw the strange, curved view of the shed roof and floor, and the engines crawling across it like steam-wreathed insects. TY-1, Julius's old engine, was already up on its legs: the driver must be testing them for some reason. Josef decided not to wait and steered around the other engine, letting off just enough pressure to keep the boiler gauge on the line. As he rolled through the door the light changed, brightened. Below a grey, cloud-heavy sky he saw the familiar white curve of the dispatch road, the start of the five-kilometre journey to the front line. He pushed the steering lever across to follow the curve, then opened the throttle a little further, watched the pressure gauge drop back and the speedometer rise. The cab began to tremble and sway.

Ingrid touched his hand; automatically, he turned it palm up. A piece of folded bread was pressed into it, containing a hot, greasy chop. Keeping one hand on the steering lever, he ate with the other. When he was finished, he wiped the grease off his chin with his sleeve and said, 'Eggs.'

‘One egg only,’ said Ingrid with mock severity. ‘You know the ration’s been cut.’ The ration had been cut months ago, from four eggs per engine to two, but Josef and Ingrid went through the same routine every morning.

It made Josef feel better, to think that the ration had once been higher, and might once be higher again. He assumed that Ingrid felt the same way.

‘I should get one and a half,’ said Josef. ‘I do all the hard work.’

‘And I have to stoke the fire!’ Ingrid sounded genuinely annoyed.

‘Oh, do as you like then,’ said Josef. But he knew he would get the largest egg, or a bit of the second one; something extra. Ingrid looked after him. Stokers were supposed to look after their drivers, but with Ingrid there was something else. Julius, for instance, would never have given Josef the larger share of breakfast. Perhaps she was just paying him back for all the advice he’d given her about life in the sheds. But no. It was more than that, too. It was almost as if she were his mother.

Josef frowned at the thought. ‘Mother’ was a concept he didn’t quite understand any more. It didn’t seem right for Ingrid, somehow. She wasn’t old enough. Only adults could be mothers. But apart from that he wasn’t sure what a mother was. It just sounded like a good thing, that was all.

‘Ugh!’ said Ingrid suddenly, spitting something shiny on to the floor. ‘There’s a bit of metal in this chop!’

‘You haven’t swallowed any of it?’ asked Josef.

‘No. I spat it out.’

‘You should have put it in your pocket,’ he said. ‘All metal is valuable. We might lose it now.’

‘Don’t be silly!’ said Ingrid indistinctly, her mouth full of meat. ‘It was only the size of my tooth!’

‘Perhaps it was your tooth!’ laughed Josef. Ingrid dug him in the ribs and laughed too.

It was probably only shrapnel, thought Josef. Enemy bodies were often contaminated with it. They were supposed to get it all out in the

kitchens, but some mistakes were inevitable.

They were on the straight part of the road now. Josef opened the throttle all the way, watched the speedometer climb. It was important to get past this part of the road quickly: it was an easy target for shells. Josef kept his eye firmly against the periscope lens, checking the way ahead in the dim light. The footsoldiers tried to fill in the shell holes as soon as they were made, but it was possible that some recent ones would remain. He could see the flicker of shellfire ahead against the low blanket of cloud, and that only made him more cautious.

Ingrid touched his hand again, pressed another piece of folded bread into it. Josef glanced away from the periscope, inspected the makeshift sandwich, and grinned. As he'd expected, there was an extra strip of the leathery substance that Ingrid had torn off her own ration.

'Thank you,' he said, because he thought he ought to say thank you. Then he began stuffing the egg into his mouth quickly because there wasn't that far to go before they reached the trenches, and he would need both hands then.

He watched the road ahead carefully, but it was clear apart from a couple of footsoldiers. They waved; Josef waved back, though he knew that they couldn't see him. He wished he could blow a whistle - it seemed to him that engines ought to have whistles - but this engine didn't have one, and none of the others did as far as he knew. Whistles must, he decided, be something to do with his previous life, like Ingrid's 'hot top'.

The road finished sooner than it should have done. Josef saw a work party ahead, the regular rise and fall of shovels, the movement of wheelbarrows. The workers were Biune, the heavy, brown-furred species who made up most of the footsoldiers. A sergeant flagged Josef down, signalled him to leave the road. Secretly pleased, Josef nudged Ingrid. 'Time to do some work.'

The girl responded at once, prising open the cokebox door behind her, picking up the shovel, then opening the firebox again and shovelling in the coal. The fire flared and the pressure on the boiler began to rise. Josef, who had brought the engine to a halt in front of the work party, waited until the gauge needle was well above the line before he spun open the leg valves. Back legs first, otherwise the fire would spill out into the cabin. Middle legs as the rear started to rise. Finally front legs. Metal creaked, clicked and squealed as the complicated series of

ratchets, levers and locks engaged and disengaged. The cabin canted forward and then levelled again.

'Ready to walk?' asked Josef. Ingrid was watching the fire, making sure there was enough fuel in there to keep them moving for as long as possible before she had to open the door again. They couldn't leave the door open whilst they were walking: there was too much danger of spillage.

Ingrid didn't reply for a moment, but he felt the machine quiver with each shovel load of coal she put in the firebox.

Josef waited, a little worried that the Biune sergeant would be angry if they didn't move quickly. But he had vanished from the periscope field; Josef could only see a private footsoldier with a pickaxe.

'Ready,' said the girl's voice at last, and Josef pulled the walk release. With a clatter of ratchets, the engine started to stride forward towards the low embankment at the edge of the road. Josef heard a rattle of coal as Ingrid slammed a last shovelful into the fire, then, just in time, just before Josef had to tilt the engine back to take the slope, the firebox door slammed shut. Josef wondered how she'd known she could get away with it without being able to see out.

He didn't wonder for long, though. Over the top of the slope was chaos. What should have been a dummy trench, well to the rear of the front line, was crawling with soldiers -

Biune, Ajeesks and a couple of the ape-like Ogrons. The trench was wider than it had been, too: Josef could barely get the engine across it. On the far side, beyond a thicket of barbed wire, more figures moved in a mist of smoke.

With a sudden shock Josef realized that they were wearing red-and-yellow enemy uniforms. Before he could think about it, there was the loud clang of rifle fire against the armour of the engine. Josef heard Ingrid's sudden intake of breath.

'The front line's moved,' he said.

'But that's impossible!'

'It's happened. The enemy are right in front of me.'

He was sighting up even as he spoke, moving the fine-etched cross-hair across the periscope field. They were in range now. With his left

hand Josef pulled the drive lever out to stop the lurching forward motion of the engine, with his right he flipped the smaller lever that exchanged the periscope eyepieces. Now he had a close view of the enemy troops.

'They're running away,' he told Ingrid. 'They obviously weren't expecting the engines this early.'

He had the cross-hairs on a fleeing Ogron. Both sides found the heavy beasts useful for front line duty, because they worked hard and were difficult to kill, especially when wearing body armour.

But a concentrated burst from the machine-gun ought to do it.

Josef pulled the remote trigger, felt the floor under his feet shudder as the gun fired at three rounds a second. The Ogron in his sights dropped. Josef released the trigger, moved the gun on to another one, who was facing the engine, firing shots from a repeater rifle. He wasn't wearing a helmet, and the first burst blew the top of his head off.

Josef felt a wave of exultation. This was what it was all about. This made everything worth it - the cold nights, the short rations, the anger of the sergeants when anything went wrong. He wheeled the periscope around, found a third target trying to take cover behind an upturned wheelbarrow. As he started firing, he smiled, and said to Ingrid, 'They're sitting targets. This is a good one. We might get extra rations for supper tonight.'

'Is it Ogrons?' asked Ingrid. 'I don't like Ogron meat.'

The third target was dead now, twitching in a pool of blood. Josef swung the periscope around again, searching.

'You'll eat anything if you're hungry enough,' he said.

The smell of well-fried bacon woke Mrs Sutton from a shallow sleep. She'd been dreaming about something: teddy bears had featured in it. Giant ones, walking around.

It must be because of that woman, Carrie's friend, she thought sleepily. Benny.

Benny! And the séance and the hole in her card table and Manda with her face blackened and Charles - Mrs Sutton opened her eyes wide and sat up suddenly, her blood pulsing heavily in her veins. Charles was

still alive! Yes, he was far away - unbelievably far away - but none the less alive, if what Benny had said was true.

If.

Mrs Sutton stared at her hands protruding from the white cuffs of her nightdress, the wrinkled fingers, the smudges that were liver spots, and thought, how many impossible things have I believed since Madame Ségovie walked through the door last night? How many of them are true?

There was a tap at the door. ‘Breakfast, ma’am?’

‘Thank you, Ginny.’

The door opened, and the maid came in, carrying a heavy wooden tray. She put it down on the foot of the bed and went to the window for the bed-table.

‘A lovely day today, ma’am,’ she commented, drawing back the curtains. Sunlight streamed in, making dazzling stripes of light on the carpets and the edge of the wooden dresser. ‘Miss Amanda’s up and gone already.’

‘Gone? What, to school?’ Mrs Sutton looked at the china clock on the dresser. After a moment her sun-dazzled eyes were able to make out the time: a quarter to eight. ‘It’s too early for school.’

Ginny put the bed-table over the bed. ‘I expect she’s gone for a walk, then.’ She put the tray on the bed-table, pulled the tea-cosy off the pot and poured a cup of tea.

Gone for a walk? thought Mrs Sutton. It was possible.

Manda often got up early. But something nagged at her.

Something about the dream she'd been having.

'Go and have a look in her room, Ginny,' said Mrs Sutton as casually as possible. 'See if she's put her school uniform on. I don't want her going for walks if she's well enough to go to school.'

The maid met Mrs Sutton's eyes for a moment, then nodded and hurried from the room. Mrs Sutton knew from Ginny's expression that she'd guessed now that something was wrong. Mrs Sutton in her turn struggled to imagine that nothing was wrong, that she was worrying about a matter of no significance. She stared at the window, golden with sunlight, then looked down and took a sip of her tea. But when Ginny returned, the expression on her face almost made Mrs Sutton choke.

'Her bed hasn't been slept in! I thought it had at first,

'cause the sheets was turned back, but if you look close you can see she hasn't been in it, and her nightdress is still folded up under the pillow.'

Before Ginny had finished speaking, Mrs Sutton had lifted the bed-table aside, careless of spilled tea, and was out of the bed, standing upright, her head buzzing and her heart hammering. There was a cold, nightmare feeling in her brain.

Was this Madame Ségovie's doing? Was it Benny's? Could anyone be trusted?

She pushed her feet into slippers, let Ginny help her on with a dressing-gown, then almost ran to Carrie's room.

Carrie was fast asleep. Mrs Sutton had to shake her two or three times, and finally shout her name, before she woke.

She blinked at her mother blearily, rubbed her eyes, then seemed to notice her alarmed expression. 'W's up?'

'Manda's gone!'

'Gone? She was here last night.' She blinked again, then seemed to realize the inadequacy of this remark and added,

‘Where’s she gone?’

Mrs Sutton ignored the question. Did you see her to bed?’

Carrie sat up, frowned. ‘She said she was going to bed.’

A pause. ‘I gave her the new teddy, she was going to call him Yewenntee, because that’s what it said on the label, and I said it was a silly name but she was determined about it.’

Teddy bears, thought Mrs Sutton. Benny had been very interested in Manda’s ‘zoo’. Why? She realized that she was going to have to contact Benny, but in the same instant realized that she had no idea how to do so. Had she said that she was coming back today, or just ‘soon’? Mrs Sutton couldn’t remember.

Carrie was still talking. ‘Manda’s always giving her teddies stupid names, Frederick’s the only one that actually makes any sense -’

Mrs Sutton took her by the shoulders, shook her gently.

‘Do you know where Benny lives?’ she asked.

Carrie shook her head. ‘No. I told you, we only met yesterday - I mean the day before - it was at the pictures, she said she was interested in silent pictures, and I said I didn’t know there were any other sort -’ Suddenly she broke off, suddenly seemed to wake up a little more thoroughly. ‘But Manda can’t have just gone! She has to have actually gone to somewhere, I mean up on the Downs perhaps, she often goes there in the morning, or -’

Mrs Sutton came to several decisions at once. She turned to the maid standing behind her, and ignoring Carrie’s continuing prattle said, ‘Ginny, go round to Mrs Fox’s and see if Manda is there. If she isn’t, try Mrs Upton and if she isn’t there either, ask Mrs Upton to telephone me. Carrie, go up on to the Downs and see if Manda is walking there - you know where she goes - and go into Christ Church, too, I suppose it’s always possible she decided to attend morning service.

Or Mr Barker might have seen her; he walks his dog before taking the service.’

Carrie got out of bed, looked around the room frowning vaguely. She picked up a hair slide from her dresser and put it in her hair, then went to the mirror and began trying on a hat.

‘Hurry up!’ snapped Mrs Sutton. ‘Just put a dress on and go!’ Ginny had already left the room; Mrs Sutton heard the front door slam.

Carrie lingered in front of the mirror. ‘What are you going to do, Mother?’ She sounded a little sobered, as if the full impact of the situation had finally reached her consciousness.

Mrs Sutton thought for a moment. ‘I’m going to get dressed. Then I’m going to sit down and wait.’

Carrie pulled out a yellow dress, held it up against herself, nodded thoughtfully. ‘In case she comes back?’

‘In case - ‘ Mrs Sutton broke off, surprised to hear a catch in her own voice. ‘In case anything, Carrie.’

She left Carrie to dress, returned to her own room, but made no attempt to dress herself. She ignored the rapidly cooling breakfast on its tray by the bed, instead stared out at the garden, at the leaves on the horse-chestnut, green edged with yellow. After a couple of minutes she heard Carrie run down the stairs and slam the front door. Mrs Sutton stared at the horse-chestnut for a few moments more, then went and sat down on the bed. She closed her eyes and put her head in her hands, then began thinking, very hard. *Benny*, she thought. *Benny*.

The woman hadn’t said that she personally could hear thoughts, but you never knew. It was something people sometimes talked about, and if half of what Benny had said about herself was true it had to be worth trying.

Benny, she thought. *I need your help*.

Mrs Sutton repeated the message four times, as mariners in distress were supposed to repeat an SOS. When she’d finished, without opening her eyes, or changing her posture, she began to pray.

Chapter 5

Professor Bernice Summerfield looked at the yellow dress spread out across the bed and sighed. She’d have loved to wear that to work, perhaps with the fluffy purple scarf, white shoes and a white hat. She could just imagine the oohs and aahs from the other girls, the amazed disapproval of Mrs Milsom, the supervisor - in fact it would probably

bring the whole factory to a stop.

‘Oh, well, one can but dream ...’ Benny muttered, and turned to the small, slightly spotty, mirror on the dressing-table to examine her blue-striped cotton dress and cheap lace collar. Even in this she was better dressed than most of the women she worked with, though, she hoped, not suspiciously so.

She leaned forward, peered closer into the mirror. She had put her lipstick on wrongly again - gone over the top of the lip contour and made herself look like a clown. She would never get used to this smudgy stuff. The Doctor had assured her that whilst it wasn’t made from any part of a whale, it was identical in colour, smell, taste and consistency to the local product. But it was no good it being authentic if you didn’t put it on correctly. Benny thought about it for a moment, then wiped the lipstick off with her handkerchief. Some colour remained, and that would have to do. She was late already.

She picked up her door keys and her satchel and left, taking one glance back at the small, plain room. It had a bed, a tiny wardrobe, a wash basin and a dressing table. There was even a rug on the floor, with a faded floral pattern. Not bad for three shillings a week. Benny closed the door, locking it behind her, and crept down the stairs. It wasn’t all that early

- half-past seven - but Mrs Kelly, the landlady, liked her morning kip, and was annoyed if her tenants made any noise that woke her up. Benny didn’t blame her. Given a chance, she’d have liked some extra beauty sleep herself. She hadn’t got back from the Suttons’ till almost midnight, and she’d spent another hour writing up her report for the Doctor. Even then, she hadn’t got to sleep for a while, but had stared out of the window at the dark bulk of the opposite terrace, wondering what exactly had happened at the séance, and how it was related to the spatio-temporal disturbance that the Doctor claimed to have found.

Outside, a fresh breeze blew across the tiny front yard, smelling of coal smoke and leaky drains, soap and dust. It was cold, much colder than the sunshine had led her to expect. Benny felt goose-bumps grow on her arms. She considered going back for her cardigan, then thought better of it. No time, really. She’d already had one warning for lateness and lost an hour’s pay. She couldn’t afford to get the sack.

She hoisted her satchel on to her shoulder and hurried down the street, waving to the baker’s boy as he passed, freewheeling on his

bicycle, panniers full of doughnuts and white rolls. At the corner of Sullivan Road she shouted a greeting to old Mrs Dark who was out, as she was every morning, scrubbing away at her front step on her hands and knees. There was something to be said, thought Benny (as she thought every morning), for doing the same thing, day after day, for seeing the same people pass by, for knowing your place in the world. Though for the life of her she couldn't imagine what.

At the end of Sullivan Road, where the cheap brick terraces gave way to the slightly more imposing frontages of the high street shops, there was a pieman's trolley pulled up on a narrow strip of grass beneath some plane trees. A big, dappled shire horse was standing quietly between the shafts.

The side of the trolley was painted in sky-blue and pink, with the words 'Doctor Smith's - Pies For All' emblazoned in gold paint along the side, and repeated in red across the striped canopy.

Doctor Smith himself stood behind the counter, serving a cluster of working men and women. He wore a plain blue shirt and a spotted red tie, a floppy white hat with a brown paisley-pattern hatband. His apron was striped, dark green and white. He was serving two-handed, but he waved when he saw Benny coming, and lifted a package wrapped in brown paper, which she knew was her lunch.

She pushed her way through the crowd, took out her purse from her satchel and extracted three penny coins and a tightly folded piece of paper. This morning, of all the mornings, she wished she could meet the Doctor in a quieter place, where they could talk, but he'd ruled it out. 'Too traceable,' he'd said. 'We had enough trouble with that in France.' Traceable by whom - or by what - he hadn't told her.

Perhaps he didn't know.

'You're late this morning, Benny,' the Doctor commented, as he took her money and her message.

'I know I am,' said Benny crossly. 'I had a late night, didn't I?'

'Um, yes, I suppose so,' said the Doctor guiltily. 'Still, I expect it was worth it.'

A man behind her whistled, then shouted, 'Been loitering down 'is garden path, then, Benny?' Benny felt a large crude hand pinch her backside. She clenched her fists, tensed her body, ready to swing round and administer a swift roundhouse punch to the offender; the

Doctor glared at her, frowned deeply, pushed the brown paper package towards her.

Still fuming, Benny grabbed the package and stormed off through the crowd, using her elbows freely. More whistles and ribald comments followed her, almost drowning out the Doctor's cry of 'Next, please'.

She was half way down the high street when she heard the factory hooter in the distance. 'Oh, slugs,' she muttered, and set off at a run.

The Universal Toys factory was a two-storey brick building dating, Bernice guessed, from about 1890. The gates were already open when she arrived, and the hooter was sounding for the second time. She hurried in across the tarmacked courtyard, holding on to her satchel with one hand - it had a tendency to slip off her shoulder when she ran. As she joined the crowd at the door, a voice called out, 'Ooh look! 'Ere she is, last-minute Benny again! Been 'avin another chat with the pieman, then?'

Benny looked around the crowd, saw Vee: a woman in her early thirties with a shock of dyed red hair and an angular, prematurely wrinkled face. She was always suspicious of Benny's 'airs and graces'. And I try *so* hard to get the accent right, thought Benny.

'At least I gets a free lunch!' she bawled. There was general laughter, which quickly died down as the women pushed their way inside. Benny was almost the last in, since she'd been the last to arrive; she ran across the tiled floor to her locker, took out the heavy cotton overall and put it on.

She put her lunch pack in the locker, but paused with her hand on the brown paper wrapping. It wasn't the right shape: she realized that it must contain something other than the usual vegetable pasty and jam doughnut. She frowned, glanced around her, but saw only other women hastily donning their overalls and trotting across to their work positions. Everyone was in a hurry: no one was looking at her. Quickly she unfolded the brown paper.

Sitting on top of the pasty and the doughnut was a small, fluffy toy rabbit, with a yellow sticky label attached to its left ear. 'Please keep me in your pocket,' said the note. 'You never know when you might need me.'

'What's that, then?'

Benny jumped, turned round, saw Vee practically staring over her

shoulder. ‘Just a present,’ she said, quickly stuffing the toy rabbit into the large front pocket of her overall.

Vee laughed. ‘A present from the pieman! What is it, an Easter Bunny? C’mon, let’s ‘ave a look.’

Benny swore inwardly. Obviously Vee had seen the toy: the news would be all round the factory by the end of the morning. She debated whether to let the woman have a proper look - it could hardly make much difference now. And anyway, she reasoned, neither the toy nor the message was enough to arouse anyone’s suspicions in themselves. It might be better not to attract attention by being too secretive.

But Vee spoiled her chances by making a grab for it.

‘Oi!’ said Benny fiercely, blocking the reaching arm hard enough for it to hurt the woman. ‘That’s enough of that!’

‘Come on, girls, hurry up now.’ The supervisor’s booming, matriarchal voice came as an immense relief to Benny: she hurried away to her work. But she could almost feel Vee’s poisonous glance on her back.

The work positions were arranged on long benches, five of them in all. Each bench was stacked with wooden crates full of teddy bears. Smaller trays of packing materials were positioned in front of the crates. High wooden stools stood in front of the benches, though many of the women ignored them; it was easier to work standing up. Sunlight, streaming in through frosted-glass windows set high in the wall, lit on rough plaster walls, a framed notice about the Factories and Workshops Act, and a large black clock. As Benny reached her position on the rearmost bench, the minute hand of the clock advanced a notch to show exactly eight.

Benny’s place was between a quiet, plump, middle-aged woman called Lil, who’d lost her husband in the war, and Vee’s sister Barbara, who was much younger than Vee and less brash. She was engaged to be married to a soldier. The job was simple enough: you took the teddy bears from their crates and wrapped them, first in tissue paper, then in brown paper. Then you put them in a fancy cardboard box, and padded the space with straw. The boxes were sent off with the lids loose, to be stapled down in the next department.

It irritated Benny to think that the items she was supposed to be investigating were passing through her hands at the rate of several hundred a day, and she still couldn’t find out anything about where they came from. When she’d asked the Doctor why he wanted her to

work in a factory he'd simply said, 'Teddy bears.'

Anyone else might have been fazed by this reply, especially when the Doctor followed it up with a suggestion that she 'borrow' one for him to examine. 'Bit old for teddy bears, aren't you?'

She'd been smiling, but the Doctor hadn't smiled back.

Not when they're being mass-produced nearly five years before the history books say they're supposed to be,' he'd said.

Benny had laughed, but she'd known something was up: only the Doctor could link together the premature manufacture of a household toy and some Earth-shattering event. She'd sneaked a teddy out for the Doctor on her second day. His next note, packed in with her lunch, had said that the toy was in fact the locator end of a mm'x synchronisis intradimensional energizer - which told Benny exactly what she suspected: something was up in a big way.

Unfortunately, it hadn't told her much about what to do about it, and neither had the Doctor.

She'd tried to find out where the toys came from - they certainly weren't made in the factory - and was informed by Mrs Milsom that they were brought in at 6 a.m.

So she'd waited outside, seen the three lorries pull up, seen the crates unloaded. At considerable risk to her dignity, she'd chatted up one of the loaders, and had discovered that the crates contained only the empty cardboard boxes that the bears were packed in, together with the other packing materials. After that she'd watched the factory for a complete twenty-four-hour period, seen nothing, and practically fallen asleep at her work-bench the next day. During work hours, on the pretence of finding lavatories or simply being lost, she'd sneaked around the premises as much as she dared, but found nothing. Finally, three nights ago, she'd broken in at 2 a.m.

and made a thorough search, only to discover that the building wasn't guarded and there was absolutely nothing whatsoever of a suspicious kind on the premises. Not so much as a secret door, let alone an intradimensional gate.

She'd made a detailed ground plan and included it in her next report to the Doctor. He'd said 'thank you' very nicely, but had failed to vouchsafe any information in return. He hadn't even told her how Chris and Roz were getting on in France.

Benny was beginning to wonder if he would ever tell her anything at all. But then, that was the Doctor. You worked with it, you put up with it. Presumably he did know what he was doing; he just didn't like sharing that knowledge with anybody else.

She remembered the fluffy toy in her pocket, wondered what it meant. Perhaps something would happen today - it was about time.

She glanced at the clock. Only ten past eight. Two hours and fifty minutes until she could even have a cup of tea. And it would be the same tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after that. Every day except Sunday, and then all she would want to do was sleep. Over the last two weeks Benny had begun to realize how women like Vee - potentially spirited, intelligent, interested in life - could become aggressive, domineering gossips. There was simply nothing else to do if you were born to this kind of life. She looked up at Vee -on the front bench, hunched over her work, talking fiercely to one of her neighbours, and wished she could get through to her, help her. But she knew she would probably never get the chance. She didn't even have the option of standing next to her.

Lil and Barbara were talking as they packed, their hands moving automatically, just as Benny's were beginning to do after two weeks of practice.

'Bert used to say that the worst thing were gas,' said Lil.

'Just as well it were a shell got 'im in the end. He wouldn't've liked to have died of gas.'

'Bob says the Irish haven't got gas,' said Barbara.

'Least, that's what they told him.' She paused, and sighed.

'Still, I'd like him home. It's not right. I thought he'd be demobbed before Christmas - but he said the rest of his regiment were going to Ireland, so he had to go too.'

Benny tried to remember who had won the war in Ireland and found she couldn't. All that she could remember was that it had been vicious and bloody, and had gone on one way or another for the best part of a century. She wondered if Barbara's young man would come back, and if so when.

'You're quiet this morning, Benny,' said Lil suddenly. 'Is you really seeing that pieman?'

The enquiry was friendly enough, but Bernice knew that any answer she gave would be repeated all round the factory. It was typical of the Doctor, she thought, to pick a

'cover' that was probably a lot more obvious than just materializing the TARDIS in a park at midnight and having a chat. Carefully she said, 'Well - sort of. He's not really my bloke, but I'm sort of seeing him.'

Lil laughed, said quietly, 'Well, there's not many blokes around now, so it's share and share alike, eh?'

Benny looked down at the teddy she was packing, avoiding Lil's gaze. She wondered whether it wouldn't be a bad idea for her workmates to think she was having an affair with a married man, which was clearly what Lil was implying.

It would explain a lot of things, particularly when she had to go over to the Suttons' again, or do anything else that didn't fit in with her 'cover story'. But on the other hand -

Her thoughts were interrupted by a shout from Mrs Milsom. 'Quiet on the floor now! Get on with your work, everyone.'

We aren't being noisy, thought Benny resentfully. And we are getting on with our work. But as the talking amongst the benches died away, Lil whispered, 'Inspection!' - which explained everything.

Benny kept her head down for a while, until the footsteps and the mutter of male voices were close enough for her to risk glancing round. When she did, she barely controlled a gasp of shock. Talking to the familiar, portly figure of the factory manager, Mr Kelvine, was a slim, tall young man in a tweed suit, whose face Benny recognized instantly. It was the face Madame Ségovie had seen last night, the face in the photograph on the mantelshelf. The face of Charles Sutton.

I have to do something now, thought Benny. Right now.

Before he disappears back through the whatever-it-is and the whatever-it-is disappears with him.

Lil was staring at her. 'What's up?' she asked simply.

Benny realized that her amazement must have shown on her face. She looked at the teddy bear she held in one hand, at the piece of tissue paper in the other. She deliberately dropped both items and then, with

a somewhat theatrical groan, fell to the floor.

'She's fainted!' Lil's voice. Other voices rose, and Benny heard Mr Kelvine asking something.

After a moment she half-opened her eyes, saw Charles Sutton leaning over her, an expression of sympathetic concern on his face.

'Has she been working here long?' he asked.

'We took her on with the third batch,' replied Mrs Milsom, from somewhere out of Benny's line of sight. 'Two weeks ago, it was.'

As Mrs Milsom was speaking, Benny saw something glinting on Charles's lapel. She opened her eyes wide, saw that he was wearing a badge with the design of a teddy bear.

Its green eyes glinted at her again.

No - not glinted - *flashed*.

She sat up. At the same moment Charles seemed to notice the direction of her gaze, and looked down at the badge. The green eyes flashed again.

Charles frowned, then said, 'I think you need some proper medical attention, Miss - urn - '

'Summerfield,' replied Mrs Milsom, before Benny could open her mouth.

The badge flickered again. 'Yes,' said Charles, with the air of coming to a decision. 'I think you'd feel much better if you could sit in a well-heated room for half an hour and have a cup of tea.'

Oh-oh, thought Benny. And: maybe I should run away at this point. But she found herself nodding weakly, and saying,

'Thanks very much, I could do with a cuppa.'

Charles nodded, helped her up. He muttered something to Mrs Milsom, possibly about not docking her any pay. If he's bothering to do that, thought Bernice, then he hasn't definitely decided that I'm anything other than what I seem to be - yet. Which puts me one up in the game, because I'm absolutely certain that he's not what he seems to be, and have been from the first moment I saw him.

She allowed herself to be walked to the stairway at the back of the packing department and up the stairs to the offices. The accounts department was as she remembered it from her first day: full of young men in suits earnestly scribbling at their desks. Several of them greeted Mr Kelvine, who was following Benny and Charles, but none of them said anything to Charles, which Benny thought was significant.

From their surreptitious glances and slight frowns, she guessed that they'd never seen him before today.

Beyond the accounts department was a plush carpeted corridor which, according to the ground plan Benny had made after her night expedition, led to Mr Kelvine's private office. Benny had of course looked in there on the night she'd broken in. She'd even cracked the safe, a fairly simple combination-lock type with no electronic parts. There'd been nothing strange about the room then.

The big oak door swung open, and Benny saw that there was nothing strange about the room now, unless you counted the teddy bear sitting on the corner of the polished wooden desk, its green eyes staring at her.

Charles sat her down in a big leather armchair by the fire, then said, 'Kelvine, get a cup of tea for us, could you?'

'Yes, sir.'

Benny caught the military tone of the brief exchange, and her ears pricked up. But she studiously remained dazed-looking, and yawned widely.

'Would you like to hold the teddy bear?' said Charles suddenly. 'I know it sounds a bit odd, but I'm sure it will help you feel better.'

You bet it sounds odd, thought Benny. In fact it has the word 'TRAP' written all over it in very large, very unfriendly letters. I ought to say no, but I'm not going to find anything out unless -

A warm, furry bundle was pushed into her arms.

'This is a very special teddy bear, Miss Summerfield,'

said Charles, crouching down so that his face was level with hers. 'I'm really rather proud of him - I designed him myself.

You could call him the prototype, I suppose.'

Bernice had an idea. 'I'd rather call him Frederick,' she said, both eyes wide open now, watching Charles's face.

There was not a flicker of emotion, suppressed or otherwise, to suggest that Charles remembered the name of his sister's favourite teddy bear. He simply said, 'I never thought to give him a name.'

'Perhaps it's a she-bear,' said Benny desperately.

'Perhaps she's called Manda.'

Charles frowned, but again showed no other emotion.

'What an odd idea. Female teddy bears. I wonder where you got that notion from, Miss Summerfield.' Somewhere in the middle of the last sentence his tone of voice had changed, the change from suspicion into certainty. His next words confirmed it: 'Who are you working for?'

Benny feigned innocence. 'I'm working for you, Mr Sutton. Or rather for Mr Kelvine, it was him as took me on.

Charles Sutton shook his head briskly, reached forward and made a grab for Benny's overall pocket.

Benny decided to stop him. She threw the teddy bear down, caught Sutton's arm and twisted it, almost succeeded in throwing him to the ground. Charles shouted in pain, chopped at her arm with his free hand. Benny landed a knee in his groin.

Charles fell back, his face screwed up with pain. Benny landed on top of him, put her knees firmly into his stomach and closed one hand around his throat until it was tight enough to hurt, but a little way short of choking him.

'Perhaps I can ask you the same question, Mr Sutton,'

she said. 'Who are you working for?'

Charles smiled, and spoke calmly, despite the fact that it must have been hard to breathe. 'I work for the Recruiter, Miss Summerfield.'

It was clear that he expected her to let him go straight away after that: the expression of surprise on his face when she didn't was almost comical.

‘OK. And I work with the Doctor. Happy now?’ No change of expression: the Doctor wasn’t that famous wherever it was that the Recruiter operated, then. Benny loosened her grip on the man’s throat slightly. ‘Perhaps you could tell me a little bit more about this Recruiter?’

Charles’s eyes moved towards the desk, and suddenly Benny realized. *The desk*. It hadn’t been there when she’d broken in that night.

‘So what’s in the desk?’ she asked Charles. ‘Or should I say what *is* the desk?’

But a slight tension in Charles’s body, a sudden movement of his eyes away from the desk and in the direction of the door, made Benny realize that she’d forgotten something.

Kelvine.

She started to jump up, but it was too late: even as she got her balance and turned to face the door, it slammed open and she found herself facing Mr Kelvine, carrying not a tea-tray, but a dark-grey service revolver. He glanced down at Charles who was still lying flat on the floor, a hand massaging his throat.

‘Alive or dead, sir?’

‘It’s all right, Sergeant,’ said Charles, getting up. ‘There’s no need to kill her. She hasn’t been through training yet.’ To Benny, he added, ‘Miss Summerfield, if you would like to give me whatever it is that you are keeping in your pocket, I would be very grateful.’

Benny hesitated, then drew out the grey fluffy rabbit that the Doctor had given her and handed it over.

‘I hope it bites you,’ she said.

Charles turned the toy over in his hands a few times. Its amber eyes flickered, in time with the eyes of the teddy bear badge on Charles’s lapel. He turned it towards the desk, and the flickering quickened noticeably.

Bit late for that now, you silly little sod, thought Benny crossly. I know where it is now. Trouble is, I can’t do anything about it.

Charles was nodding slowly as he watched the performance of the Doctor’s toy. Suddenly he bent down and picked up the teddy bear

that Benny had been holding earlier, which had fallen to the floor by the fire. The green eyes, Benny saw, were now definitely glowing. He thrust the toy into Benny's arms. Benny became aware of a curious thing: although a moment before she had been afraid, tense, every muscle ready to jump to safety should a chance offer itself, now she could feel the tension slipping away, to be replaced by a pleasant feeling, a feeling that everything was going to be all right.

'What's going on?' she asked dreamily.

'You will be trained, then you will be assigned to a unit,'

said Charles.

Benny noticed that the electric light on the wall behind Charles had begun to blur, blue on one side, red on the other. As she watched, the entire room dissolved into a swirling mixture of colours, leaving only Charles and Sergeant Kelvine solid and real. In her arms, the teddy bear was warm, almost hot: its eyes glowed a fierce, electric, green, and seemed to be staring at her.

Once they've got the controller installed, thought Benny, a teddy bear is all they need. How clever.

She made a quick calculation: I was packing a teddy bear every two minutes, that's thirty an hour, nearly three hundred a day. Nearly two thousand a week. There are forty of us, and the factory's been open for six weeks. So that's about half a million children.

For some reason the fact didn't disturb her, though, when she thought about it, the fact that it didn't disturb her *did* disturb her.

But not very much.

The booming of gunfire interrupted her thoughts: the polychromatic display behind Charles and Sergeant Kelvine was beginning to settle down. Benny wasn't really surprised to feel a slight change of gravity, to see a grey sky, the flicker of shellfire, a high tangle of barbed wire surrounding her on all sides.

And thick, glutinous mud under her feet.

'If you could come with me, please,' said Charles Sutton, shouting now over the pounding of the guns. He led the way towards a hole in the ground: Benny could see the beginning of a flight of steps leading down. The mud clutched at her shoes and the hem of her skirt. The air

was cold, and stank of rot and sewage.

Charles led the way down muddy wooden steps into a dimly lit bunker. The walls and ceiling were covered with metal sheets, perhaps a crude attempt at armour plating. The ceiling was so low that Benny and Charles had to bend almost double to avoid banging their heads on it. Sergeant Kelvine, with the gun, stayed at the bottom of the steps.

'I must apologize for the poor reception facilities,' said Charles. 'All I can say is, they're no worse than those that I endured. When we begin bulk recruitment, things will be much better laid out, I can assure you.'

'Bulk recruitment?' asked Benny, remembering her earlier calculation. She felt the tension return to her body, the soothing feelings disappeared. Suddenly she was afraid, confused, and angry. Half a million teddy bears from one factory in England alone. Half a million children. And how many other factories are there? In how many countries?

Doctor, you should be listening to this!

'You realize that you'll be recruiting children, don't you?'

she asked.

'Of course,' said a new voice, deep and booming and definitely not human. 'We are recruiting children deliberately.'

Benny looked round, saw a large, furry shape lumbering out of the shadows. Two green, pupil-less eyes stared at her.

For a moment she thought that this was the big brother of Charles's teddy bear, somehow come to life. Then she saw the three-fingered hands, the blue-andbrown uniform covering the furry body. Alien, then: but although she recognized the species, she couldn't immediately put a name to it. She knew so many species. Too many, she sometimes thought.

Whoever they were, Benny decided, they weren't the sort she'd invite to dinner. 'Why?' she pleaded, letting the anger show in her voice. 'Why *children*?'

'Children make better soldiers,' said the teddy bear.

‘They kill without compunction.’ It reached behind it, picked up a silver object which looked like an electric drill, then went on, ‘That is, once they are suitably adjusted.

Adjustment is more difficult if the subject is an adult, but success rates are still very high.’

The electric drill began to whine: a soft, almost whispery noise, that spoke of finer tolerances and higher technology than anything else Benny could see around her. She opened her mouth to ask about it, but before she could speak her arms were grabbed from behind.

Now hold on!’ she said. ‘I’m not sure I want to be - ’

The teddy bear stepped forward and put its free hand over her mouth. Something wet and cold spread over the lower part of Benny’s face, and her lungs filled with a cold, pungent gas. She struggled, but it was too late.

The last thing she saw before she lost consciousness was the silver tip of the drill bit approaching her face.

Chapter 6

Gabrielle wiped the oily sleeve of her overalls across her forehead, careless of the mark it would leave on her skin.

She could have a bath after the flight: that was one of her privileges. Then she looked again at the dull metal of the crank, touched her finger to the pivot where the piston-rod joined it, felt the tiny crack there. If she didn’t get that replaced, there might not be any ‘after the flight’.

‘Engineer!’ she shouted. There was no response.

Gabrielle hauled herself out from under the engine and looked around. There were four other aircraft, monoplanes like her own, parked out on the concrete strip that ran from the hangars to the runway, their blue and brown colours dull under the grey blanket of morning cloud. The rest of the space was empty, a bare expanse of concrete, mottled here and there with filled-in bomb craters.

Gabrielle hated that empty space. She knew that the pilots had died because they hadn’t been as good as her, or as clever as her; but none

the less she missed their talk, their boasting, their simple noisy presence on the airfield.

She shouted for the engineer again, cupping her hands so that the sound would carry, but there was still no response. She trotted across the concrete to the parked planes, saw Oni, the only other human on the base, sitting in the cockpit of his plane in his grey flying leathers, testing the controls. He waved a gloved hand at her. She waved back, called, 'Seen Elreek?'

Oni made an elaborate shrug. 'Haven't seen him today, ma'am.' Oni always called her 'ma'am' even though there was no difference in rank. Perhaps, Gabrielle thought, it was because he was relatively new - only three weeks on the base. Or perhaps it was because he was two years younger than her. Either way, she rather liked it.

'Who checked your plane out then?' she asked him.

Oni shrugged again. 'I'm checking it now. It'll be all right.'

Gabrielle shook her head. 'It won't be all right, Oni. You know that. You should have everything checked by an engineer before you fly.'

'I'll be all right, ma'am. Don't you worry.'

I'm not worried, thought Gabrielle. I'm just trying to save your life. If you'd rather fall out of the sky because of a loose bolt on the propeller mounting, that's fine by me.

Aloud she said, 'If I find Elreek I'll get him to look your plane over.'

But as she'd expected, Oni only shrugged again and resumed his casual check of the controls. Gabrielle sighed and crossed the runway to the main hangar, a low building with a brick base and a roof made of three curves of rusty corrugated metal. She pulled back one of the heavy doors, looked inside. There was a single monoplane in the hangar, the one flown by the Kreeta, Jeekeel. The engine cowling was open, the propeller had been removed. Behind the plane, the electric light from the machine-shop door made a blurred rectangle on the oil-stained concrete.

Gabrielle called for the engineer again, was rewarded by a movement within the machine shop and the pattering of hooves on the stone floor. She smiled as the blue-skinned Kreeta trotted towards her from the machine shop, his huge black eyes gleaming in the light from the open door; then frowned as she realized that it wasn't Elreek at all,

but the new engineer, Freeneek.

‘Where’s Elreek?’

Freeneek’s huge black eyes blinked once. ‘Reassigned,’

he squeaked simply.

Gabrielle pursed her lips. ‘Reassigned? Where? How?’

‘I don’t know.’ Freeneek waved his four long, thin arms around in a gesture of uncertainty. ‘Just gone.’

Just gone? thought Gabrielle. But engineers were supposed to be safe. They didn’t go near the front line. And she’d have known about it - would have heard it herself - if there had been an enemy raid here. Perhaps he wasn’t dead, perhaps he had really been reassigned. But that was strange, since his area of expertise was aeroplane engines. He wouldn’t be much use anywhere else. Perhaps she should check with the flight sergeant

No. Best not to ask, Gabrielle decided. Best not to think about it. There was a job to get on with. She told Freeneek about the damaged crank. They crossed the airfield together, past Oni’s plane which was taxiing slowly towards the end of the runway, with a couple of rabbit-like Ajeesks acting as ground crew and supporting the tail. She waved to Oni, watched as the plane gathered speed and lumbered into the air.

‘The engine doesn’t sound right,’ she said to Freeneek.

The Kreeta blinked his eyes slowly, the equivalent of a shrug. Gabrielle stared after the plane for a moment, sighed.

She did rather like being called ‘ma’am’, and having another human to talk to, even if he was infuriatingly stupid. It would be a shame if he didn’t come back.

Best not to think about it. There was a job to do.

Standing by her own plane, leaning on the side of the cockpit, she watched closely as the Kreeta crawled underneath the engine and explored the metal with his long, multi-jointed fingers. ‘There is a flaw,’ he said after a while.

‘But the engine will function for today’s flight, at least. Maybe for

several days.'

'I want the crank replaced anyway,' said Gabrielle. She remembered arguments like this with Elreek. She'd always won them. In the end, he'd given up arguing.

'It's impossible to replace it. There aren't any parts available.'

Gabrielle stared at the two thin legs projecting from under the engine housing, resisted an urge to kick them. 'Yes there are! Elreek had a whole rack of cranks in the machine shop yesterday, he showed them to me.'

'The spare parts have also been reassigned,' said Freeneek.

'What?' Gabrielle stared over the nose of her plane, across the airfield to the main hangar. She could see the machine shop building behind it, a sloping roof ending in a serrated edge. It certainly hadn't been taken away, bombed or reassigned - anyway, Freeneek had been standing there less than five minutes ago. She stormed across the concrete, heard the Kreeta's hooves clattering in pursuit.

In the main hangar, she stopped at the door that led to the workshop, stared in amazement.

Bare benches, a few vices clamped to them, a few drills and metal saws scattered about. A single propeller mounted on the wall. But Elreek's neat racks of spare parts, labelled, their tolerances marked down in a pencilled notebook - they were gone. Gone with Elreek. Reassigned.

'I just found it like this,' said Freeneek from behind her, his voice even smaller and squeakier than usual for a Kreeta.

'Perhaps they need the parts to build more planes, to replace the ones we've lost. I don't know.'

Gabrielle swallowed. 'But how are we supposed to keep the planes flying?'

'It's been cleared with Flight Sergeant Purdeek,' said the Kreeta.

Gabrielle's body began to shake. I'm not taking my plane up with a cracked part, she thought. I'm not going to die just because -

Her brain refused to complete the thought. She would have to speak

to Flight Sergeant Purdeek. She would have to speak to him now, before she took off.

'There is something I could do,' said Freeneek quietly.

Gabrielle turned and looked at him. 'Yes?'

He gestured at Jeekeel's plane. 'I could take a crank from that one,' he said. 'Swap them.'

Gabrielle thought about it. Kreetas, with their huge eyes, usually flew at night, harassing enemy trenches, reporting their positions. So Jeekeel wouldn't be needing the plane for twelve, perhaps fourteen hours. But the engine was identical to her own. And swapping the cranks would be quicker and more effective than re-rigging the controls for two-armed human use. On the other hand -

'That's a new engine. The crank won't be worn in as much. It'll run rough.'

The big dark eyes met hers. 'I can file it down.'

Gabrielle nodded. 'Do it.'

She thought: if anything goes wrong, I'll be leaving Jeekeel with a potentially dangerous plane. And: even if nothing goes wrong, and the parts are swapped back, *his* engine will run rough tonight.

She shrugged. There wasn't anything she could do about it. She was more experienced than Jeekeel: she had more kills to her credit. She was entitled to the best possible support.

As Freeneek went to work on Jeekeel's plane, she trotted back across the airfield to her own hangar, her own plane. She re-examined the fuselage, the narrow struts that supported the wings. The bomb cradle, the release mechanism. Linkages, control cables, flaps, rudder. She barely noticed when Freeneek came in and began working under the engine cowling, replacing the damaged crank.

But before he began reassembling the engine, she was down on the floor, watching, turning the crankshaft by hand, making sure.

It was good enough. She went to her locker at the edge of the hangar, took off her overalls and put on the thick padded grey leathers of her flight suit.

She was in the cockpit, fitting her mask, with the engine already running, when Flight Sergeant Purdeek came out from the hangar. He waved at her, two-handed, Kreeta fashion; she waved back, then frowned under her mask.

There was something she'd been going to ask him. Was it important?

No, she decided. It couldn't be anything important. If it had been important, she would have remembered it.

She finished fitting her mask, then pulled open the throttle and taxied towards the open hangar door.

Josef wiped at the periscope eyepiece with the sleeve of his shirt, but he still couldn't see anything through it except the vague shadows of a dark ground and a pale sky. He bled pressure from the boiler, chocked the legs, felt the engine steady underneath him.

'What's up?' asked Ingrid.

'The periscope lens has steamed up again.'

'Is it safe to go out and clean it?' she asked.

Josef laughed. 'How do I know? I can't see anything!'

More soberly, he added: 'We're behind our own lines, I think.

But it's hard to tell.' He paused. 'I'll go.'

Ingrid shook her head. She was already opening the door. 'You're more important than I am,' she said simply.

It was true, of course: Josef was a driver, Ingrid just a stoker. Even so, they were both replaceable. Only the ground-engine itself was important.

He began to say something, but Ingrid was gone. He heard her scrambling over the cabin roof. He drew his handgun from the holster above the fire box and leaned out of the door to give her cover. The churned-up mud of the battlefield was almost white under the hot morning sun. Josef had trouble seeing anything in the fierce glare. But there was a sound - a distant, steady, mechanical thudding, barely audible over the hisses and clicks of the leg joints.

With a shock, Josef realized what it must be.

At the same time, Ingrid shouted something. Josef heard her clatter back across the roof, and ducked back in just as she jumped down.

'Enemy ground-engines!' she yelled. 'Two!'

'I heard them,' he said, shoving the handgun back into its holster and putting his eyes to the periscope. The lens was still grubby, streaked with dirt, but he could see through it. He rotated it, searching for the enemy, saw them striding across the harsh landscape. They were almost within range already.

The forward gun on one of the enemy ground-engines flickered, and bullets clattered off the boiler. Josef heard an ominous popping sound, followed by a loud hiss.

Ingrid's hand touched his shoulder. 'Pressure's dropping!'

I know, thought Josef. He wondered how the enemy had managed to hole them from so far away. Were their guns better than his?

But it didn't matter. It was best not to think about it.

With the boiler holed, they weren't going anywhere: all he could hope to do was destroy one of the enemy engines before they destroyed his.

He aimed the cross-hairs on the nearest of the enemy engines and opened fire. Bullets sparked off its armour, but it didn't stop, merely returned fire. A series of deafening impacts set the cabin ringing.

Ingrid shouted something: Josef glanced up from the periscope and saw her opening the door.

'- other side -'

'Yes!' shouted Josef, returning his eyes to the periscope.

'You go! You can be saved, if you run fast enough!' He fired another burst at the advancing enemy, smiled as they pulled up. At least they'd keep their distance now.

Until he ran out of bullets, that was. With two of them attacking, and most of his ammunition spent in the attack, he didn't stand a chance.

Ingrid's hand grabbed his arm, tugged. 'You go!' she bawled in his ear. 'I'll work the gun!'

Josef knew she was right: he was the valuable one, and anyone could

work the gun. But he couldn't let her die for him. He just couldn't. He pushed her back, at the same moment as the cabin reverberated to another burst of enemy fire. He looked up, saw a bright hole in the top of the cabin.

Ingrid was gone from his side, but he could see the bottom of her legs hanging in the doorway, and the handgun was gone from the holster.

Josef wanted to shout at her that there wasn't a chance, that she'd never do any damage at this range with a revolver, that she should make a run for it; but she was too far away to hear. More bullets rang off the cabin wall, and Josef returned his attention to the periscope.

He wondered what it would be like to die, and why he didn't like the idea.

When Sergeant-Recruiter Bernice Summerfield woke up, the first thing she noticed was that she was ravenous. She couldn't remember when she'd last had a decent meal. It had probably been before - before -

She shook her head, which hurt rather badly, and decided that it was no good trying to chase memories with a hangover like this. Get some breakfast first. Or supper. All according to what time of day it was.

She sat up, discovered that she was lying on a bunk.

She wasn't in uniform: she was wearing a blue striped cotton dress and rather muddy shoes with low heels. Vaguely, she wondered why this might be, but the answer seemed to have gone the way of her other memories.

She looked around her. Dim yellow light illuminated a brick wall only a few feet away. Leaning against the wall, sitting on a stool, was a man she immediately recognized as Lieutenant-Recruiter Charles Sutton.

Sergeant Summerfield struggled to make a salute, but Sutton just shook his head and smiled.

'Your head's going to be a little bit sore for a while,' he said. 'I know mine was.' He gestured at two faint scars on his forehead. Summerfield reached up, touched her own forehead, winced.

Of course. Training scars. Nothing to worry about, but inevitable on a new assignment.

Sutton grinned at her pained expression. ‘I did warn you.

Come on, let’s get something to eat. We’ll have to hurry -

you’re on duty in an hour.’

An hour, thought Summerfield. Only an hour? Give me a chance. Wherever I was last night, the party must’ve finished very late.

She staggered out of her bunk and followed Lieutenant Sutton down the drab brick-walled corridor that led to the officers’ mess. Her head ached every step of the way, as if someone had kicked it. Perhaps someone had. She seemed to remember a fight -

She shook her muzzy head. I’ll have to ask the Doctor about this, she thought, get him to regenerate my memories, or something. They’ve gone completely AWOL. I must have had far too much this time. It’s the Oolian brandy chasers that do it.

The smell of cooked meat lifted Summerfield out of her reverie. Food! she thought. And: must remember to ask Lieutenant Sutton what time of day it is.

The sergeants’ mess was a large, brightly lit space, with rows of dull brown wooden benches and tables at which sat a variety of species. Rabbit-like Ajeesks, grey-furred and long-nosed, sat with the blue-skinned Kreetas. On larger benches, a bearlike Biune in sergeant’s stripes ate with a few adult humans and a single Ogron.

Summerfield frowned as she looked at the Biune. There was something about the word Biune - something about that species, now that she knew their name -

She shook her head. Best not to think about it. There was a job to get on with. And besides, she was *hungry*.

Lieutenant Sutton guided her to an empty bench, went to a serving hatch and shouted an order. Within half a minute, an Ogron in kitchen whites appeared with a steel tray and put it down on the table in front of them. Summerfield’s mouth watered at the smell that rose from the plates, and she tucked in greedily. It was plain fare, a white meat rather like rabbit mixed with bits of offal and a starchy, potato-like vegetable, but Summerfield didn’t

care. It was food, and that was all that counted.

After she'd finished eating Sutton ordered some drinks, a disappointingly non-alcoholic slop that was served in white-painted tin mugs and tasted slightly of apples. Still, she supposed it was best not to drink alcohol if she was going on duty.

'What's my assignment?' she asked Sutton.

'Emergency recruiting again. Bit of an interference problem with the new planet.' Sutton sounded casual enough, but Summerfield knew that the 'new planet' was his planet - and, for that matter, her planet. The honour of the human species depended on their getting this right: interference must not be allowed.

She nodded solemnly at the lieutenant, raised her glass in a silent toast. He smiled slightly in response.

'Don't worry, we're bound to be successful,' he said.

'Right inevitably triumphs in the end.'

Even from a hundred and fifty metres, the ground-engines were clearly visible, two of them in their ugly, enemy yellow-and-red, stalking across the trenches. Gabrielle could see the bright flicker of their heavy-calibre guns as they fired: she couldn't see much evidence of return fire from the crippled engine painted in the colours of her own side, certainly not anything heavy enough to be effective. There was a figure on the canted roof of the cabin, but whether it was dead or alive, Gabrielle couldn't tell from this height. She glanced forward, over the ridge of hills above the trenches, to where her own side's artillery lay, the guns scattered like toys across the mud. Most of them were firing, but the shells were landing well behind the ground-engines, regular explosions pounding an empty tract of mud some way behind her. Unless someone destroyed the enemy ground-engines, the damaged engine would be lost. And ground-engines, Gabrielle knew, were even more valuable than aeroplanes.

Gabrielle thought about that for a moment, then nodded to herself. Yes. This had to be the best use of her bomb.

The decision made, Gabrielle eased back on the stick, banked, then began a slow turn. She wiped her goggles with her free hand as the landscape whirled below, suppressed the urge to scratch the training scars on her forehead which were itching as usual under her leather mask. She briefly checked the sky around her for enemy planes.

All clear. Good.

She leaned over the side again. She'd made a complete one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn, and the enemy ground-engines were straight ahead of her. She straightened out, raised the flaps, opened the throttle. The engine revved up sweetly, without any trace of roughness or knocking: Freeneek had done his job well. As the airspeed increased, wind buffeted Gabrielle's body and the plane began to rock slightly. She tramped the rudder pedals, pulled at the stick, got the plane balanced again. At fifty metres, she made a last check over her shoulder, to make sure that no enemy plane had crept up behind her, then put her eyes to the bomb-sight and her hand on the trigger that would release the bomb.

The bomb-sight showed a distorted view of the ground, making it appear to be a huge bowl-shaped valley of mud.

The ground-engines, tiny now, crawled across the bowl. The cross-hairs in the bomb-sight supposedly showed the place where the bomb would land, but Gabrielle was experienced enough to know better. It depended on the wind. It depended on the weight of the bomb, your airspeed when you dropped it. It depended, in the end, on how low and how slow you were prepared to go to make an accurate job of it.

She licked her lips, tasted petrol fumes, salt sweat, the leather of her flying mask. The ground crawled past, the two striding engines passed the cross-hairs, got closer, and closer, and closer - less than thirty metres - she could see the identification letters on their sides, the pistons moving, the guns turning to get a bead on the damaged engine and finish it off -

Now! She pulled the trigger, felt the bomb unlatch. The plane, relieved of the load, jumped upwards. Gabrielle looked up from the sight, yanked back on the stick, watched the ground tilt away and the grey sky fall across the nose of the plane. The acceleration of the climb pressed her into her seat, but even so she checked again over her shoulder to make sure that there was no enemy plane on her tail.

Still clear. She was lucky today.

The roar of the bomb exploding almost drowned the sound of the engine for a moment, and a second later the plane rocked under her. Gabrielle eased the throttle a little, came out of the climb and banked to one side, then looked over the edge of the cockpit to see how much damage she'd done.

Lots. The bomb must have hit the nearest ground-engine square on the

boiler, exactly as she'd intended it to. Gabrielle could see only a few pieces of metal scattered around a smoking crater. Better still, the second engine was on its side, flames licking over the cab and the twisted remains of the legs. A tiny figure waved from the roof of the friendly engine: Gabrielle realized with a start that it was human. She grinned and waved back, then straightened out and pulled back on the stick again.

As the ground dropped away, she caught a glimpse of a dark speck to her left, quickly eclipsed by the wing. She ignored it, as far as the movements of her plane were concerned - he was still well out of range, so let him think she hadn't seen him. But mentally, she prepared herself for the fight.

At the top of her climb, she banked again. She was too far up now to see much detail on the ground, but she could see the blue specks of friendly uniforms - Ogrons, she hoped

- advancing towards the destroyed engines. Behind them, the ridge that hid the artillery rose sharply.

A plan came into her mind. It might not work, but it was neat, it was clever, and it was virtually risk-free. She twitched the rudder, banking the plane slightly, as if she were looking for something on her right. At the same time she looked over her left shoulder.

There he was, just above the wing and closing fast.

Gabrielle felt a surge of pure exhilaration. Bombing might be important from a military point of view, but it was boring. This was what she lived for.

She yanked the stick forward and nosedived for the ground. If her pursuer thought she was panicking, if he thought she was inexperienced, then he was more likely to make the mistake she was hoping he would make.

The ground got closer, fast. Gabrielle saw churned mud, broken by winding trenches. She could smell it through the fumes of the engine, the sewage and rot and death of the battlefield below. At about thirty metres - low enough to panic a novice - she pulled back on the stick and at the same moment swerved violently, almost staffing - but not quite. She hoped her opponent wouldn't notice how finely judged it had been.

He didn't. His plane vanished below hers, ready to open fire. Ahead,

the ridge was getting closer.

Gabrielle swerved, heard a clatter of gunfire. She could almost see the bullets streaking upwards past her wing tip.

She swerved again, to the right as before, was rewarded by a further clatter of firing that missed her altogether. She imagined the pilot of the other plane, keen for a kill, swinging the gun around to follow her, his eyes on the gun-sight and not on the lie of the ground ahead.

The ridge was very close now, a sloping wall of mud.

She could see a single Ogron footsoldier, staring up at her in amazement.

The roar of an engine, a bulky shadow appearing to her left. The enemy. Less than twelve metres. Their wingtips almost touching. The propeller biting the air, the engine cowling slightly dented, red and yellow paint flaking.

The pilot in brown leathers, seeing the approaching ground, and pulling frantically at the controls.

Gabrielle pulled her sidearm from her flying leathers, took aim at his head as his plane slowly pulled past hers. He turned and looked at her: white eyes in a dark-skinned face stared at her through huge goggles. Human, she realized with a shock. A dark-skinned human, like Oni. She hadn't realized that there were humans fighting for the enemy.

Not that it mattered.

She fired.

The goggles shattered.

The pilot dropped, his plane tilted to one side. Gabrielle grinned to herself, opened the throttle very slightly, and soared over the barbed wire at the top of the ridge with a dozen feet to spare, as she'd known she would. She heard the dull thud of her opponent's plane exploding as it hit the ground behind her and nodded to herself in satisfaction.

She'd won. She'd made a kill.

She banked sharply, pulling her plane right through the field of fire of the artillery below the ridge. It was a risk, but a calculated one: there

weren't that many shells, and they weren't actually aiming at her. Within a few seconds she was above the range of the shells again and soaring back out across the battlefield.

She glanced down, saw the burning wreck of the other plane ahead of her, surrounded by Ogrons in blue and brown uniforms. She grinned to herself: they'd come out of their holes quickly enough at the prospect of bounty.

Ogrons were all the same.

When she was close enough to get a good look, she slowed the plane almost to stalling speed and cruised above.

One of the Ogrons had the body of the pilot in his arms. He looked up at her and waved, mimed biting into a chop.

Gabrielle waved back, but then quickly turned away, feeling slightly sick. She knew that enemy flesh couldn't be wasted, but there was something about them *eating* human flesh -

something she didn't like -

She shook her head. It was silly to think about things like that. It had to be this way: this was war. This was the way it was meant to be. She automatically looked around the sky for enemy planes.

All clear. Time to go home then.

She climbed, perhaps a little higher than she should have done, briefly lost herself in the base of the clouds.

She wondered what human flesh tasted like.

Sergeant Summerfield was ready for her mission. She was standing in a small, circular, stone-walled room, with Lieutenant-Recruiter Sutton and Sergeant-Recruiter Betts.

Both men were in full uniform, and carried rifles. Sergeant Betts also held the Recruiter field activator, a small fluffy toy that looked like a model of a Biune. Summerfield was still wearing the striped cotton dress: Lieutenant-Recruiter Sutton had explained that it was necessary for this particular assignment. He hadn't gone into further details, just told her that she would know what to do when the time arrived.

They would go, of course, when the Recruiter decided that they

should go. When it detected the signature of the interference they were trying to suppress.

Summerfield's heart beat uncomfortably. She didn't like not being sure of what to do, even though she knew that the Recruiter would release necessary information in her mind as soon as it was needed. She fingered the holster of the sidearm they'd given her, fitted to a leather belt, incongruous around the waist of the dress, and looked around at the bare grey walls of the room.

'A bit dull in here, isn't it?' she said.

Sutton and Betts both stared at her.

'The walls. They could do with decorating. A little purple paint, a few Picassos, and they'd be fine.'

The men glanced at each other. Sutton frowned. 'I don't quite understand -' he began.

'Or perhaps a yellow colour scheme, to make the most of the ambient light.' She grinned and gestured at the single dim globe in the middle of the ceiling. 'And some pictures of the sea - you know, little yachts sailing off into the sunset, dolphins leaping in formation, that sort of thing.'

'This is war, you know,' said Sutton mildly. 'There's no time for luxuries like that.'

Summerfield bit her lips She knew he was right. But surely there was no harm in talking about it?

'Sorry, sir,' she said, suppressing her annoyance. He was after all her superior officer. 'Just trying to pass the time.'

Sutton shrugged. 'It shouldn't be long now.'

The minutes crawled by. Summerfield stared at the ground, waited in silence like the others, trying not to think of anything. At last she saw the eyes of the Recruiter field activator light up, saw colours seep into the walls of the room.

With a feeling of relief she watched them dissolve into a swirl of colour; after a moment she felt the fractional increase in gravity which told her she was back on Earth.

She looked around, frowned. The room she was standing in seemed familiar. There was a leather armchair in front of a long-dead fire, a heavy wooden desk, a leaded window showing a view of brick walls and a dimly lit courtyard under a deep blue sky. A clock on the wall said six forty-five.

'Fifteen seconds,' whispered Sutton. He and Betts crouched down, one under the table, the other behind the cover of the armchair. The muzzles of their rifles protruded from their hiding-places.

'Should I take cover, sir?' asked Summerfield.

'Stay where you are,' came the whispered reply. But the words were redundant: Summerfield could feel her instructions forming in her mind as the Recruiter's servants released the information.

She relaxed a little. The situation was still dangerous, but at least she knew what to do now.

A faint whistling, groaning noise began, echoing despite the small size of the room and the plush furnishings.

Summerfield felt a trickle of fear, and at the same time, contrarily, an odd, reassuring sense of familiarity. She fought the familiarity, the reassurance, knowing that they were the enemy.

The noise grew louder. A pale shape appeared in the middle of the room, thickened to become a large blue box with a light flashing on top of it. With a thud that shook the room, the box became solid, real. The light went out.

Summerfield waited for the Doctor to emerge, as she knew he almost certainly would. She pulled her sidearm out of its holster, checked that it was loaded. She was going to have to be careful here.

The door of the box opened, and a small man in a rumpled white suit, blue shirt and purple tie stepped out.

Instantly, Lieutenant Sutton and Sergeant Betts scrambled out from their improvised cover, jabbed their rifles at the newcomer. Summerfield took aim as well, just to be on the safe side.

He glanced from one to the other of them, then doffed his hat politely, said, 'Hello, I'm the Doctor and this is my friend Benny. I wonder if -'

Sutton ignored him, looked at Summerfield. 'Sergeant?'

Summerfield nodded. ‘That’s him all right.’ She grinned.

‘You can bet he’ll be the source of any interference that’s going on.’

Sutton grabbed hold of the Doctor. Betts shoved the Recruiter field activator against his chest and held it there, but the Doctor didn’t seem to notice. He was staring at Summerfield as if seeing her properly for the first time. Oddly enough he wasn’t looking at the gun in her hand, but at a point a few centimetres above her eyes. Uncomfortably, she wiped her free hand across her forehead, felt the bumps of the fresh training scars there.

They must look worse than they feel, she thought, for him to be staring at them like that. She wanted to tell him that it was all right, the scars didn’t hurt that badly and she felt as right as rain; but it wasn’t appropriate to talk like that to a prisoner.

The room was filling with rainbow colours as the Recruiter began to bring them home. But the Doctor wasn’t taking any notice; he was still staring at Summerfield.

‘What have I let them do to you, Benny?’ he asked suddenly, then suddenly crumpled in his captors’ arms, shouting in what seemed to be a near-insane fury with himself. ‘What have I done? What have I *done*?’

Book Two

Marching Orders

Chapter 7

Amalie Govier added a little more salt to the cooking pot, then resumed stirring, pushing the wooden spoon round and round, letting herself relax in the steady heat radiating from the iron stove. Today had been a good day. Today the detectives had visited her again, as they had, without fail, every month since Gabrielle’s disappearance. And, better still, this time she had been able to help them. She smiled as she recalled the eager expression on the young man’s face when she’d mentioned the teddy bear she’d bought in Touleville, and later

the negro woman's satisfied nod when she'd taken the bear out of its packaging and examined it with the torchlike device. They hadn't said anything directly, but it was clear that finding the bear was a big step forward in their investigation.

Perhaps they will find Gabrielle at last, thought Amalie.

Please God they will.

The big wooden door of the kitchen rattled open, and Nadienne walked in. The bulge in her belly was quite obvious now, and around the house she was wearing a loose print dress made for comfort rather than fashion. She smiled at Amalie.

'We do employ a cook, Auntie.'

'I thought it would do her good to have an evening off,'

replied Amalie. In fact, Nadienne's cook had most evenings off: Amalie enjoyed cooking. But she left the dirty implements in the sink, though she would rather have cleaned them herself, just so that Madame Detaze had something to do.

That way everyone's pride was satisfied, and the portly cook, widowed in the war as Amalie had been, could go courting her new gentleman friend on the warm September evenings.

Nadienne's remark, of course, was part of the game. So was her smile, and her half-hearted attempt to push Amalie aside from her position at the stove.

Amalie shook her head, jokingly patted Nadienne's swollen belly. 'You don't want to stand too long with that,' she said. 'Believe me, I know.'

'Five minutes won't hurt me! It's only six months.'

'Tush! Everyone knows it's eight!'

Nadienne blushed, and gave way, sitting down heavily on the one wooden chair in the kitchen, which was positioned by the door to the garden. That door was open, letting in a cool breeze. Nasturtiums hung around the outside of the door, framing the deep blue of the evening sky, their big round leaves waving gently. A few flowers remained, their yellow and orange colours deep and rich in the light from the kitchen lamps.

‘Where’s Jean-Pierre?’ asked Amalie.

‘Gone over to Septangy for Henri and Michelle.’ Despite the breeze, Nadienne had pulled a fan from her pocket and was waving it about in front of her face. ‘He’s ever so proud of his new car, he’ll think of any excuse to drive it.’

Amalie smiled, remembering Nicolas and a white horse called Salamande, back in the early days. Men were all the same.

She became aware of footsteps on the path outside the garden door. Nadienne had heard them too: she was twisting round in her seat, looking over her shoulder. ‘It’s a soldier,’

she said. ‘English, I think.’

Amalie frowned. ‘What would a soldier be doing here?’

Something fluttered in her stomach. A soldier meant trouble.

A soldier meant death.

She shook her head, told herself not to be silly.

Outside, there was the sound of someone knocking on the front door. ‘Hello! Is anyone home?’ A man’s voice, with a strong English accent. Amalie belatedly remembered that the manservant, Georges, was out in the vineyard, checking the ripeness of his precious grapes, and wouldn’t be answering the door. She lifted the cooking pot on to a cooler part of the stove top, then walked around Nadienne’s chair into the dim coolness of the garden. Above the high tops of the michaelmas daisies, she saw the man standing with his back to her at the main door of the house.

‘Hello! Can I help you?’ she called.

The man turned round, traced his way along the flagstones that skirted the flowerbeds, his soldier’s boots clicking on the stone. He stopped a pace away from Amalie and saluted.

‘Good evening, ma’am,’ he said in his accented French.

‘I’m Sergeant Dale of the British Army Special Investigations Unit. I don’t like to trouble you, but I wonder if you could spare a few minutes to help with an enquiry I’m making in this area?’

Amalie stared at the man, frowned. There was something about the

expression in the man's grey eyes that was familiar. She couldn't remember where she'd seen it before, but -

The fluttering feeling returned to her stomach.

'Certainly,' she said, managing to keep the nervousness out of her voice. 'Come in a moment.'

Nadienne was standing in the doorway, her face flushed.

'What is it about?'

'You needn't worry,' said Dale calmly, stepping past her into the kitchen. 'It only concerns Madame Govier.'

How did he know my name? Amalie felt her stomach clench, tight. There was a roaring in her ears.

'Is it to do with Gabrielle?' she asked aloud. Have you found Gabrielle?'

The sergeant shook his head. 'We've heard about the disappearance of your daughter, Madame Govier. Believe me, we're sorry for your distress.'

He doesn't sound sorry, thought Amalie. And he doesn't look sorry. His face is calm. Too calm. If only I could remember -

'But I'm afraid this is a different matter,' Dale went on.

'We're looking for a couple of fraudsters. A man, and a negro woman claiming to be Americans. They may also be claiming to be private detectives.'

Amalie knew that she had to sit down then. She collapsed on to the wooden chair by the door.

'You've seen them?' Dale's voice, from somewhere to her left. He sounded oddly far away.

'Auntie?' Nadienne was standing in front of her. She raised her eyebrows slightly, and Amalie knew what she was asking: *what shall I tell him?*

Amalie looked over her shoulder, saw the sergeant standing there in front of the oak dresser, his face impassive.

A deep gut instinct told her to tell him nothing, to get him away from here. But she knew that he had already guessed the truth, and his next words confirmed it.

'They were here today?'

Amalie nodded, though her instincts howled in protest.

What else could she do? The man was official, wasn't he?

And Cwej and Forrester were most certainly unofficial.

But they're my *friends*.

Dale was pulling a notebook out of the pocket of his uniform shirt, stepping forward so that he was standing in front of her, beside Nadienne. 'When did they arrive?'

Amalie shrugged. 'They arrived for breakfast. And they left about an hour ago.'

'Have they been regular visitors?'

'Once a month. The sixteenth.'

Dale nodded, wrote rapidly in his notebook. Amalie remembered Cwej, sitting in the *auberge* six months before, also writing rapidly. Her throat tightened painfully at the memory.

'Are you sure they're fraudsters?' she said aloud. 'I trusted them. They just talked, asked how I was, told me a little about their investigation. They didn't take any money.'

She glanced at Nadienne, as if for reassurance: the young woman shook her head. 'Not a centime, as far as I know. Unless my father was paying them, but I doubt it.'

Dale seemed unmoved. 'What did they say about their investigation?'

Amalie frowned. 'Oh - just general things. They were reassuring.' She looked up at Dale's face, met the grey English eyes. 'I needed reassurance, monsieur. I still do.'

Dale nodded. 'Of course. I understand.'

But your eyes don't understand, monsieur, thought Amalie. Why don't they? Have you no children?

‘Nevertheless I must know what they told you,’ Dale went on, remorseless. Did they mention an investigation in England?’

Amalie jumped, though she supposed that she shouldn’t have been surprised, given the nationality of the sergeant.

She wondered how much she should tell him, how much he already knew.

‘England, yes,’ she shrugged. ‘And Austria, Germany, even Russia. They said it was a worldwide conspiracy.’

Did they say where they were going, when they left you?’

They had; Cwej had told her that they were meeting the Doctor and travelling to England. But Amalie decided that the time had come to lie. She wasn’t going to betray her friends to this cold-eyed man.

She shook her head. ‘They never told me their plans.’

She gave a half-glance at Nadienne, hoped that the younger woman would understand it.

Nadienne looked at the floor, pursed her lips, but thankfully said nothing.

None the less Dale seemed to sense the lie. He looked around the kitchen for a moment, stared at Nadienne.

Did they speak to anyone else?’

Nadienne answered.‘My husband, yes. But he is out at the moment.’ She explained about Henri, the new car, the supper party. Dale listened without interest. It was as if, Amalie thought, he was only interested in his investigation; as if everything else, all the colours and comforts and subtleties of life, were utterly unimportant to him.

But he must have been listening after a fashion, because after Nadienne had finished he asked: ‘May I stay until your husband’s party return? They might have some useful information.’

Amalie wanted to say, no, no, get out of my house, you cold unpleasant man. But how could she? He was the British Army after all. And Nadienne was already offering their guest coffee, fussing around the big oak dresser in search of the pot.

Amalie watched as Dale moved to stand against the wall next to the

window, his eyes expressionless and his face wooden, as if he were a toy soldier, a clockwork thing, an automaton. She felt a renewal of her earlier fear: *a soldier means death*.

She looked into the cold grey eyes, knew that Dale could kill. Would kill, if he had to. For the first time she noticed the leather gun holster at his waist.

How can I stop this? she thought. How can I prevent it?

'Would you like milk with your coffee?' asked Nadienne.

Chris Cwej and Roz Forrester watched as the last dull red gleam of sunlight disappeared from the tops of the pine trees that stood on the crest of the hill.

'It's set, hasn't it?' asked Roz suddenly.

Chris peered across the narrow strip of dry grass that separated the ring of pines from forest that sloped away towards the valley. The sky above the tree tops was a clear, glassy blue. He nodded. 'I think so.'

'Then he's late, isn't he?'

Glumly, Chris nodded again. He didn't want to admit it, but it looked like Roz was right. The Doctor had said he would meet them before sunset. The sun had now set, and the TARDIS wasn't here.

'He could have been delayed,' Chris pointed out. Roz turned and stared at him. 'He's got a time machine, for goddess's sake. How can you be late in a time machine?'

She began pacing up and down between the pine trees, the teddy bear that Amalie had given them tucked under one arm, the other arm crooked so that she could stare at her genuine twentieth-century wristwatch. She had taken her red pullover off, and her armour gleamed dully in the fading light from the sky.

'I think it's significant that he told us Benny was investigating a factory in England,' Chris said after a while.

'Maybe he's there, helping her out. I don't expect he can be in two places at once.'

Roz looked at him, grimaced. 'You sure of that? Besides, if he knew he was going to be late he'd have left a message.

Even if it was just a yellow sticky. A new time, a new place, new instructions. Anything. Goddess, even "I'm okay, you're okay" would've been better than this.' She resumed her pacing, her fists clenched. 'We should've arranged a fallback.

I knew we should've. He just wouldn't listen.'

Chris nodded agreement. Not for the first time, he wished that the TARDIS's equipment list included some kind of communicator. But perhaps it wasn't possible, with all those extra dimensions to cope with.

'You know what *I* think is significant?' asked Roz suddenly. She had stopped pacing and was standing in front of Chris, her free arm pointing at him, almost prodding him in the chest. 'I think it's significant that we've been checking out this place for the last week or so

- how long is it local time? Six months? - and the first time we find any sort of evidence - ' she hoisted the teddy bear up and waved it under Chris's nose - the Doctor doesn't pick us up. Someone's one step ahead of us here.' She frowned, glanced around sharply. 'I'm thinking we ought to be out of this place.'

Chris in turn looked around them at the forest. The light was fading rapidly, and a thin mist was forming, turning the mottled green of the canopy to an even grey. The undergrowth was black with shadow, and the dry mud track that led back to Larochepot and the valley was already almost lost in the darkness. Anyone could be hiding there.

Chris listened for suspicious sounds, heard a groaning noise which he thought for a moment might be the first sound of the TARDIS materializing; but then the sound was repeated and he realized that it was only a cow bellowing in the valley.

'I reckon we should wait a bit longer,' he said at last. 'The Doctor's never let us down before. We shouldn't just give up on him because he's a bit late.'

'What do you suggest we do then? Wait around for trouble to arrive and then hit it over the head with the teddy bear?'

Chris blushed, but persisted. 'What do you suggest?'

Roz shrugged. 'We should hole up in the woods somewhere.

Out of sight. Check the place again in the morning.'

'We could go back to Amalie's,' said Chris.

'If they are one step ahead of us, they might be waiting for us there.'

Chris nodded. 'It means a warm bed for the night. And some supper.'

'And a hole in the head, if we get - '

Roz broke off as a crunching sound began in the undergrowth, startlingly loud. Chris whirled around, his hand moving to his belt where his blaster should have been. It wasn't there: the Doctor had insisted that they leave their weapons behind. He glanced at Roz, who had made exactly the same sequence of movements. She cursed under her breath, crouched down.

The crunching sounds continued for a few seconds, then were interrupted by a muffled grunting. Chris listened for a moment, felt a wave of relief.

'Pig,' he muttered to Roz.

'Speak for yourself, kid,' she said with a grin. 'I'm quite a tidy eater, when I'm sober.' She stood up, dusted pine needles off her trousers. Looked at the path that led back to the village and scowled.

Did you say we might be in time for supper?'

Chris nodded, grinned. 'Jean-Pierre went out to fetch Henri and his family. Remember? And they won't be back yet.'

Roz gave him a glance. Just a glance. 'OK, kid,' she said. 'But you just remember that this is only the least dangerous of two dangerous options. We take it slowly, and keep an eye out for anything suspicious. Clear?'

Chris nodded, blushing with pleasure as they started down the path to the village and Amalie's house. It wasn't often that Roz came round to his point of view, he thought, but it was nice when it happened.

Jean-Pierre seemed to have expanded since his marriage: what had been stringy and clumsy about his figure had become bulky and articulate. His gestures were definite, his manner resolute, his voice loud. Now, in his Paris suit, blowing on a cigar and drinking an armagnac, he seemed almost to fill the small sitting-room of his house.

Amalie wasn't sure that she liked him any more.

'I always did suspect these Americans,' he said to Sergeant Dale. 'The negro in particular. Whoever heard of a woman detective? Or a negro detective, for that matter. I know that they're supposed to be very liberal about the dark-skinned races in America, but I know for a certain fact that there are New York restaurants where "niggers" -' he used the American word - aren't admitted. I can't see how one would be allowed a licence as a "private eye", can you, Henri?'

Henri shrugged. 'I'm very much the provincial on these matters. However, I must say that I couldn't see any harm in them. They took no money from us.'

'They have kept Amalie here! - Not that we mind, Auntie,'

he added quickly, smiling at Amalie, 'you are wonderful company - but they have kept her here, kept her miserable, when it is obvious - I'm sorry, Auntie, but it is obvious - that the girl is gone, and will never be back.' He gestured with his cigar, taking in the whole room with the gesture, as if to tell them all how obvious it was: Henri and his wife Michelle in the leather easy chairs by the fireplace, Sergeant Dale standing by the door to the hallway, the manservant Georges standing next to him, Amalie and Nadienne side by side on the *chaise-longue*, Nadienne's younger sister Marie sitting on the piano stool.

Amalie shook her head, wondered what she could say.

She'd known that Jean-Pierre was getting exasperated with her continued presence in his house; she'd known that he didn't have much faith in Cwej and Forrester and was inclined to believe the police in Lyons, who had more or less closed the case. But she hadn't thought he'd be so outspoken about it. Not yet, anyway. She hadn't thought that things would get really difficult until after the child was born - and she would have gone then, as soon as Nadienne was recovered from the birth. She would have rented a property in Septangy, or maybe even gone back to the flat in Paris for a while, started to try and live a life of her own.

Now it was all spoiled, it had all become indecent and argumentative. She looked at Sergeant Dale, at his notebook, at his cold grey eyes, and hated him.

Perhaps Dale noticed this, for he suddenly shut his notebook with a snap and said, 'Well, I won't trouble you any further. Thank you for your time and the information you've given me.' He leaned over and

muttered something to Jean-Pierre, then turned on his heel and walked into the hallway: Jean-Pierre followed, cigar in hand, booming something about seeing him out. As he passed the door, he beckoned to Georges, who followed him.

After a moment, Amalie glanced at Nadienne, who blushed. 'Sorry, Auntie,' she murmured.

Amalie shrugged. 'He's entitled to his point of view.' She could hear men's voices continuing in the hall: she noticed that Henri too had got up and gone from his place by the fire.

'... dangerous ...' she heard, and '... shotgun ...'; Jean-Pierre saying, 'Of course, of course.'

She felt a rush of panic, sprang to her feet.

'Auntie - !' called Nadienne; but Amalie was already half-way across the room.

At the hall door, she hesitated. The three men were standing by the main door, which was open. They looked up when she came into view. Henri frowned and hurried across to her.

'There's nothing to worry about, my dear,' he said quickly. 'Sergeant Dale will look after us tonight.'

'Look after us?' But Amalie knew: over Henri's shoulder, she could see Dale still talking to Jean-Pierre. His hand was near the leather gun holster at his waist.

'You weren't to know,' said Henri kindly, putting an arm around her shoulders and virtually pushing her down the hallway and into the empty kitchen. 'I wouldn't have guessed it either. But your friends have a shotgun, maybe two. They're really very dangerous - '

'Dangerous? But they haven't done anybody any harm!'

Not here, no. But Sergeant Dale has told me - you wouldn't believe it, Amalie, really you wouldn't.' He lowered his voice. 'They're not Americans at all, they're Russians -

Bolsheviks. Or at least, Cwej is, and the negro is working for them. A mercenary of some sort.'

'I *don't* believe it,' said Amalie. 'Are you sure that Sergeant Dale is

genuine, Henri?'

Her brother stared at her, his eyes shadowed in the lamplight streaming in from the hall. 'Don't be ridiculous, Amalie! Of course he's genuine! He is from the British Army!

Look, I know how much your mind has been unsettled by losing Gabrielle, and I know how much you must blame yourself, but - '

He broke off as Jean-Pierre stepped in from the hallway.

'Henri - Dale and I are going to round up some of the villagers and have a go at finding these people. We'll take Georges. Dale is pretty sure they're still in Larochepot. But I think you ought to stay here and guard the house, just in case.'

He sounds so important, thought Amalie. So pleased with himself. It's as if he's fighting the war again. Wearing his uniform.

She remembered Forrester's 'bullet-proof vest', always worn, like a uniform, under her English clothes, and almost started to cry. 'These are my *friends*,' she said. 'Why are they suddenly being hunted down like animals?'

'It has to be done, Auntie,' said Jean-Pierre.

'But why?' wailed Amalie. 'Somebody tell me why. They did nothing here. They did nothing to us. If they are Bolsheviks, why can't we let the police deal with them?'

Neither of the men answered, but Amalie saw the embarrassed glance exchanged between them.

'He told you that they've hurt Gabrielle, didn't he?' Again, there was no reply. Amalie grasped her brother's shoulders, shook him. 'Tell me!'

He nodded, slowly.

'It's not true!' bawled Amalie. 'I know it's not true!' Her vision was beginning to blur with tears.

'Oh, for God's sake get her in the sitting-room, Henri,'

said Jean-Pierre irritably.

'Come on,' said Henri, putting an arm around her shoulders again. 'I'll

get you a brandy.'

As they walked through the hallway, she saw Dale standing in the main doorway, smoking a cigarette. He was looking down at something in the palm of his free hand: Amalie saw two flickering green points of light, like a tiny pair of eyes. As she watched, he swung his hand from left to right and back again, then nodded slowly. Amalie knew, then.

Knew for certain.

'He did it!' she bawled, pointing at the soldier. 'Look what he has in his hand! He took Gabrielle! He killed her!'

Dale turned and frowned at her.

' *Auntie!* ' shouted Jean-Pierre.

'Really, Amalie - ' said Henri.

And she heard Nadienne's voice: 'I'll get her to bed.'

Sobbing, Amalie crumpled to the floor, felt the cold tiles of the hall against her cheek. Without really knowing why, she let herself be helped to her feet and guided upstairs by Nadienne and her sister-in-law Michelle, into the small room with the rugs and the brass bedstead that Jean-Pierre and Nadienne let her use. They sat her on the bed, and Nadienne sat beside her. Michelle went to the window, stood looking out.

'They said something about a shotgun,' she said. 'Do you think we should close the shutters?'

'It's not true,' protested Amalie. 'They said they were Bolsheviks, too, and it's not true. It's Dale! It's the soldier, I tell you!'

Michelle simply ignored the last remark, exclaimed,

'Bolsheviks, here in Larochepot! You're not safe anywhere!'

She pulled the shutters closed and pushed down the bolts.

'I'd better go down and sit with Henri and Marie. You stay here with Amalie, Nadienne.' She was trying to sound firm and controlled, but Amalie could hear an edge of hysteria in her sister-in-law's voice. Why did they all believe it, she thought, when the Americans had shown them nothing but kindness and courtesy?

‘There is some stew on the stove, keeping warm,’ said Nadienne suddenly. ‘If anybody is hungry.’ She patted her own belly.

Michelle glanced at her, the ghost of a smile easing the tension lines on her face. ‘ *Eh bien*, you go and eat, then. I will stay with Amalie.’

‘I’ll be all right alone,’ said Amalie. ‘I’m tired; I’ll have a little sleep.’

Nadienne and Michelle glanced at each other. Michelle shrugged and sat down in a chair by the bed. Nadienne left.

Amalie lay back on the bed and shut her eyes, though she knew she wouldn’t really sleep. She heard the sound of men’s voices muttering outside, of footsteps on the path, the click of Sergeant Dale’s army boots. His voice, with its English accent, said quietly, ‘Follow me. They’re not far away.’

Amalie shivered.

From behind the partial cover of the flowerbeds, Chris watched the three men make their way along the drive. In the dim light from the doorway he recognized Jean-Pierre, rifle slung over his shoulder, walking just behind the English sergeant. The manservant, Georges, took up the rear, carrying a shotgun. The three passed alarmingly close as they neared the gate: if it had been fully light, Chris knew that he and Roz would have been spotted at once. As it was, in the darkness, the men passed by without seeing them.

At the gate the sergeant stopped, said something in a low voice. Chris risked raising his head a little, saw a glint of green light.

Now where had he seen - ?

He looked sidelong at Roz, saw the dim green glow in the eyes of the toy bear she was still holding. At the same moment he heard a whispered order, a clatter of metal.

The bear, he thought. The soldier has a tracking device.

He got a reading from the doorway, he got a reading from the gate. Now he knows where we are.

Footsteps began tramping on stone, on soil, coming closer fast.

Chris grabbed the bear from Roz. She let it go, but stared at him, her lips silently framing a question. Chris touched her on the shoulder and

then ran, crouching to keep behind the cover of the flowers.

‘Get some lights!’ shouted someone. ‘They’re making a run for it!’

‘Blasted bolshies! Let me at ’em! I’ll give ’em what for!’

Chris reached the corner of the flowerbed, saw the open kitchen door in front of him. He looked in, saw Nadienne standing over the stove, her face lit red in the light spilling from the fire box of the stove. She stared at him, big-eyed, then screamed.

‘It’s him! It’s Cwej!’

‘Nadienne -’ Chris began, but she was stumbling out of the kitchen, still shrieking. He hurled the bear inside, ran on around the kitchen block, past the bottom of the outside staircase, to the darkened rear of the house where he had proper cover. There was enough light to see the grey shape of a small lawn, beyond which was the dark shadow of Nadienne’s vineyard. There was a gate at the bottom of the vineyard, and a path leading to the woods; he and Roz had agreed to use this as a line of retreat in the event of an emergency.

He started across the lawn, heard the clatter of shutters flying open. Light flooded out, and a woman shouted, ‘Stop it!

Stop it!’ Another woman was shouting something else, which ended in - fool, Amalie!’

Chris looked up, saw Amalie leaning out of the window, at the same time caught a movement in the corner of his eye.

Roz. She must have gone the other way around the house, Chris realized.

Amalie seemed to see her at the same time, shouted,

‘Rosalind! Rosalind! I want to help you!’

‘If you want to help me - ‘ Roz was running across the lawn now, heading for the cover of the vines. A shot rang out.

- then turn that light out!’

Another shot. Roz jumped as if stung, but carried on running. A man came into view around the corner of the house, heavily built, bearing a shotgun: the servant.

He pointed the shotgun directly at Chris. Uselessly, Chris ducked.

'No, Georges!' Amalie's voice.

Georges hesitated. Chris ran. There was another revolver shot, and the louder crack of a rifle. Roz was gone, invisible amongst the vines. Chris too plunged under cover, just as the shutters slammed, plunging the garden into darkness.

'Open them again!' shouted Jean-Pierre. 'Open them again, woman! We need to see!'

There was muffled shouting from inside the house, a woman's scream, 'No!' A door slammed.

Chris crawled across the dry soil beneath the vines, trying to make as little sound as possible. He wondered if Roz had been hit, and if so how badly.

And what was he going to do about it if she was seriously hurt?

'They're in the vineyard -' Georges's voice. A clatter of shutters. Light.

Light! Chris rolled to his feet, ran, crouching down to avoid the yellow-green leaves of the vines and the dark bunches of grapes. Long, blurred shadows stretched out under his feet on the rough soil.

'Kill him!' The Englishman's voice.

'No!' Amalie again. She sounded closer now: Chris realized that she must have come down the outside steps to the garden. 'Stop this!' she shouted. 'They are my friends!'

The light dimmed, then shut off abruptly.

'Are you mad?' Chris recognized Henri's voice. 'Amalie, are you mad? Why have you put out the lamp?'

'Georges! Relight the lamp!'

Chris had almost reached the gate. I should check to see if Roz's OK, he thought. Make sure that she made it out of the vineyard.

'Roz!' he whispered, as loud as he dared. 'Roz!' He heard footsteps running on the gravel path that led between the vines to the gate; the tread was far too heavy to be Roz's.

Chris dived forward towards the sound, arms extended to trip. At the last instant the running figure seemed to realize what was about to happen and jumped.

Too late. The impact jarred Chris's arm, but the man went over. Chris heard him roll, rolled his own body to one side to avoid -

A revolver cracked, a bullet whined through the air somewhere near Chris's head. At the same time a lamp flared in the direction of the house: Chris saw a running figure silhouetted against the light. With a shock he recognized Amalie.

'No!' she shouted. 'You will not kill him!'

'It's OK -' began Chris; but Amalie plunged on, dived headlong into Dale. The revolver went off again, the sound curiously muffled. Dale picked himself up, leaving Amalie face-down on the ground: with a start of horror, Chris saw blood on the sergeant's uniform.

'Amalie!' Henri's voice. 'You have shot Amalie!'

Chris started to get up, then saw a figure standing at the top of the path, silhouetted against the light from the house, aiming a shotgun. He froze, half sitting, half standing, one hand against the ground.

Then he realized that the gun was not aimed at him, but at Dale.

The sergeant stared at Henri, frowned. 'She was assisting the enemy,' he said, his voice Balm and reasonable. 'She was on the side of the Bolsheviks. She was the enemy.'

'You have shot Amalie!' repeated Henri.

Jean-Pierre was pounding down the path ahead of Henri, shouting incoherently, almost screaming, waving the long barrel of the rifle in front of him. The sergeant's eyes flicked from Jean-Pierre to Henri to Chris. He touched something on his wrist.

Multicoloured light flared around him, and he vanished.

There was a single shot, far too late. Chris saw the splutter of dirt as the bullet hit the ground less than a metre from his feet.

He saw movement from below him, by the gate; turned and saw Roz, leaning against the wall, her free hand clamped against her leg. He realized that she must have been there all along, watching. Now she

started to limp forward, her face pinched with pain.

‘Don’t try to move her,’ she said. ‘Let me take a look.’

But Jean-Pierre was already trying to turn Amalie over on to her back. Henri was hurrying down the path to join them.

Chris stood up.

‘Don’t move! Neither of you move!’ Jean-Pierre’s voice.

He had stood up, leaving Amalie on her front with her head twisted sideways. He was aiming his rifle at Roz.

Henri crouched down over his sister, began slowly shaking his head.

‘Jean-Pierre,’ said Roz. ‘Chris’s got a medikit. We might be able to help Amalie.’

Chris remembered the medikit, stowed in the inside pocket of his twentieth-century suit. It was a tiny field model, with a hyperadrenalin spray, some plastaforms and a couple of programmable viruses. Whether that would be any help depended on the nature of Amalie’s injury.

‘Let them help her.’ A woman’s voice, older, speaking from near the house: Michelle, Chris decided.

‘It doesn’t matter.’ Henri. ‘She’s not breathing. She’s dead.’

Roz staggered forward past Chris, still holding her leg.

Her hand and the top part of her trouser leg were soaked with blood, and she was breathing in short, tight gasps. Jean-Pierre tracked her with the gun. Roz scowled at him. ‘Put that sodding thing away.’ She turned to Chris. ‘Chris, give me a hand here.’

Chris cautiously walked up to Roz and Amalie. The Frenchwoman lay quite still. Her brother stood over her. The manservant stood beside him holding the lamp.

Nearer the house, Michelle and Nadienne stood with their arms around each other. Nadienne’s free hand was against her mouth and she was shaking her head in slow horror.

Roz crouched over Amalie, and Chris saw for the first time the blood pooled beside the woman’s body, soaking into the dry soil. Roz put a

hand to Amalie's neck, reached up with the other. 'HA spray,' she said, her voice tight with pain.

Chris got the medikit out of his pocket, moving slowly, conscious of Jean-Pierre's rifle which was still pointing in his direction. He opened it, pulled out the spray and handed it to Roz. The little unit's CAT scanner had automatically powered up: Chris held it over Amalie's head. Red lights blinked, and a small machine voice said, 'Zero blood pressure: critical anoxia, cerebral cortex dysfunction imminent.'

Chris glanced at Roz, heard the hiss of the HA spray.

Amalie's body jolted and fresh blood ran out across the ground.

'Shit,' muttered Roz. 'Shit, shit, shit. This isn't going to work.'

'What are you doing?' Jean-Pierre's voice. 'What are those lights? If she is alive we should take her to the doctor in Septangy.'

Chris lowered the scanner to the region of Amalie's chest. An image of her heart and lungs appeared, floating in the space above the medikit. Chris didn't need the blinking red schematics to see the tear in the left ventricle. Under the influence of the adrenalin released by the tiny self-propelled capsules in the spray, the heart was trying to beat, but the ragged edge of the wound quivered uselessly. Bright red arrow schematics showed the rapid blood loss. The machine's small voice chattered on about arterial damage.

'We've got some blood pressure,' said Roz. She took the medikit from Chris, glanced at the display and swore again.

'Get her breathing, Chris.'

Chris put the medikit down, pushed Amalie on to her back. Nobody tried to help him. He sucked in a breath and began mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, aware that it was probably useless. Amalie's lips were already cold. Unless her heart was replaced there was no way she was going to live more than a few minutes.

He breathed into her, felt her chest rise. Lifted his head and watched as the weight of the chest wall expelled the air.

He heard Jean-Pierre's voice: 'Stop that! You are making it worse.'

And Roz: 'We need a replacement heart, quick. Where's the nearest organ bank?'

Chris breathed into Amalie, again, felt her chest rise again.

‘What are you talking about? Is she alive or dead?’ That was Nadienne, close by. Georges was shouting something in the distance, and Jean-Pierre was talking quickly. The medikit started a long, continuous whine. Its mechanical voice was saying something, but over the noise of the others talking Chris couldn’t hear what it was.

He raised his head, sucked in another breath, breathed into her. He put a hand on her chest as it fell: blood flowed over it. Desperately, he pushed his lips against Amalie’s once more.

Roz shouted, ‘Where’s the sodding organ bank? We need to get her a replacement heart, for goddess’s sake - ’

‘You can’t replace someone’s heart!’ Nadienne again.

‘You must be mad! Look, I worked with injured soldiers in the war, let me - ’

‘It’s no use.’ Henri’s voice. ‘She’s dead.’

There was a moment’s silence. Chris sucked in another breath, but felt Roz’s hand on his shoulder. ‘He’s right, Chris.

The kit says she’s gone.’

Chris looked down, registering for the first time Amalie’s open, staring eyes, one pupil contracted more than the other, a curl of brown hair plastered to her forehead by sweat. She’s dead, he thought. She was kind, she was trying to help us, and now she’s dead, and it’s our fault for being here, for using her to investigate this thing -

‘Right.’ Jean-Pierre’s voice, brisk and authoritative.

‘Georges, go and start the car. Henri, stay here with the women. Send someone to fetch Father Duvalle, for - ‘ he paused, swallowed, - for Amalie. I’m taking these two to the police in Septangy.’

Now just a minute!’ said Roz. ‘We didn’t shoot her. Your vanishing friend did that. We’ve just tried to save her life, and now we need your help to find out - ’

‘You can explain that to the police!’ Jean-Pierre was standing over them now, the muzzle of the rifle almost against Roz’s head. Now walk! Towards the car!’

Roz stood up, swayed a little, put a hand on her injured leg. ‘I’m going to need a plastaform on this,’ she said, her voice shaking a little.

Jean-Pierre gestured with the gun. ‘You can do that, whatever it is, when you are in the car. Walk!’

Roz gave the man a murderous glance, but she walked.

Chris followed. For a moment - just a moment - he considered trying to jump Jean-Pierre, but quickly decided that he didn’t have a high chance of success. There’d been enough heroics, and enough bullets flying, for one night.

When they reached the house he glanced back along the path between the vines. Henri was leaning over his sister’s body: as Chris watched, he gently closed her eyes.

Chapter 8

When Sergeant Summerfield woke up she was no longer responsible for recruitment. She was vaguely aware that she had been, but the memory was no more coherent than that of a dream: there had been a blue box appearing out of the air, a civilian in a rumpled suit with his hands above his head. A factory, somewhere.

She shook her head. No time for dreams now. She had to get on with the new job.

She rolled out of her bunk on to the muddy concrete floor, pulled on the trousers and jacket of her new red-and-yellow uniform, then looked around the dugout that was now her command. It was small, and very basic: a single-squad hole in the ground, with three sets of bunks jammed against the crude metal blastproofing, one to each wall, and a single gas-burning stove occupying most of the remaining wall. To its left a low brick archway revealed the beginning of an upward flight of steps. A square wooden table, muddy and burn-scarred, stood in the middle of the room: there was barely space to pass between it and the bunks. A low rumble of shellfire ran through the dugout, occasionally rattling the metal sheets on the walls.

Summerfield checked on her staff. The top two bunks in her tier were occupied, the troopers sleeping in their Muddy, dull red-and-yellow uniforms. Both of them were Ogrons: good fighters, she knew, but stupid. She was going to have to do a lot of their thinking for them.

She checked the other two sets of bunks, saw four more Ogrons and a couple of Biune.

'Teddy bears,' she muttered. 'Slow movers. But at least they've got brains.'

She pulled her helmet and her rifle from their hooks on the wall across the bunk. She put the helmet on; it came down over her ears. She adjusted the chin strap, but even at the tightest notch it was still loose.

Not good enough,' she muttered. 'Must have a word with the costume department.' Then she frowned, wondering why the remark seemed funny. What was a costume department?

She briefly checked her rifle, then slung it over her shoulder before starting across the dugout towards the stairway that led to the surface. Her new boots squelched in the mud, ankle-deep on the floor. Half-way across she slipped and almost fell, had to put a hand on the table to steady herself. She gazed at the bloodstains on the table for a moment, wondering what had made them, then shook her head. Whatever had happened there, it didn't concern her.

The stairway twisted sharply to the left. There was no rail. Summerfield had to keep a hand on the rough bricks of the wall to stop herself from falling. She became aware that her boots, like her helmet, didn't fit properly: they both flopped awkwardly, and the right one chafed her heel. She wondered in passing if the alien that made them had ever seen a human being.

Daylight became visible: a ragged entrance, part blocked by the heavy form of a Biune. Summerfield called up,

'Sentry!'

'Sergeant!' The heavy form turned, and Summerfield saw the faint glow of the alien's green eyes.

'How's the duty squad doing?' There had to be a duty squad: eight soldiers in bunks meant eight soldiers on shift above ground, manning the trench.

Not much activity up here, Sergeant. Couple of bombardments, and a plane tried to drop a bomb, but nothing else nearer than half a mile. We've been conserving ammunition.'

Summerfield nodded. ‘Conserving ammunition’ meant

‘nothing to fire at’. Which could be good news - or bad, if they had to advance to a new trench because they were too far from the enemy. She climbed the remaining steps so that she could take a look for herself.

Outside, surprisingly, it was sunny. The sunlight shone through a thin haze of smoke and dust, which made the sky white, but it was nevertheless warm, almost hot on the side of Summerfield’s neck. The mud on one side of the trench steamed slightly, and she could see small things gleaming in it, crystals, pieces of broken glass, fragments of metal. A dry bone projected from between two pieces of wood. The squad were all in sight: three more Biune in the heavy machine-gun emplacement, a fourth about fifty metres away, on sentry duty at the top of a wooden scaling ladder, the two Ogrons squatting near the dugout entrance sharing a mess tin of fried meat with a pale, dishevelled human. These three shuffled to their feet as Summerfield approached, and the human saluted her.

‘Corporal Holder, Sergeant.’ The dim thunder of shellfire which she’d heard in the bunker had become louder, loud enough for Holder to have to shout at her to make himself heard.

Summerfield nodded. ‘I’m Sergeant Bernice Summerfield, and I’ve been assigned to this squad.’ She paused, briefly wondered who the previous sergeant of this squad had been, and what had happened to him or her.

Perhaps her squad would like it if she asked -

No. Better not to think about it. She knew what her duties were, and that was all that mattered.

She looked around the squad again. ‘I’d better have everyone’s names.’

The Ogrons, mouths full, gave their names as Urggh and Iggh; the Biune were T’oru, D’sha and Mai on the gun, Ge’von on sentry duty, and P’skeo at the bunker entrance.

She remembered someone telling her that Biune names always had two parts: a glottal expletive, and a softer sound made with an intake of breath. She also remembered being told that the Biune were a peaceful, meditative people who had no word for ‘war’ in their language.

She frowned, wondered who had told her that, and why it seemed important. It wasn't important, surely? Their history didn't matter: all that mattered was how well they fought now.

Anyway, what did 'peaceful' mean?

She turned back to Holder, who was still standing to attention, said, 'Dugout sentry says it's been a quiet day.'

Holder nodded in return. 'Rumour has it the ground engines have outflanked the enemy again, Sergeant. Their artillery's been forced back.'

Summerfield thought about it. If the enemy advance had been broken up, it might mean that some of their units were stranded in parts of trenches without support or supplies. In which case -

'How long until you change shifts, Corporal?'

'We change at sunset, ma'am.'

Summerfield nodded, glanced at the sun. It was high in the sky, surrounded by white glare. 'Time for a little scouting party, I think,' she said. 'Make sure your ammo belts are full.

T'oru, D'sha - stay with the heavy gun and cover us.'

The two Biune nodded; the third, Ji'taj, stepped out of the sandbagged emplacement, picked up a rifle and methodically began to check the mechanism.

Summerfield shook her head. That was the trouble with Biune, she thought. Too careful by half. She quickly checked her own rifle then started up the ladder that led over the top.

Ace would have enjoyed this, she thought. Shame she's not here. Then she frowned, paused with her hands on the sun-warmed rungs of the ladder.

Why did she keep thinking things that made no sense?

She didn't know anyone called Ace.

And what did 'enjoy' mean?

They were out in the open, crawling mid-way between their own trench and the enemy's, when the ground-engine appeared. They

heard it before they saw it: a distant, repeated, thudding sound. Holder, who had a pair of binoculars, saw the plume of steam beyond the enemy lines, and quickly established that the vehicle was painted in the blue and brown colours of the enemy.

Summerfield swore under her breath, propped herself up on her elbows and looked around at the uneven plain of wet mud. There wasn't much cover, unless you counted a low, ruined wall that looked as if it might have once been part of an airbase or a factory. A tangle of barbed wire, lying across a shallow pool of scummy water, was between the squad and the wall. Summerfield couldn't see what lay beyond it, but there'd been occasional sounds of rifle fire from that direction. Still, it had to be better than being here, a sitting target for the ground-engine. With luck - if they got there quickly enough - it might not see them. She half-stood and started towards the wall at a crouching run, waving at the squad to follow.

By the time they'd reached the barbed wire, the ground-engine had stepped over the enemy trenches and was advancing across no man's land. Summerfield saw the metal body of the machine turning slowly towards them. Another hundred metres and it would be in range.

Holder and Ji'taj were already cutting at the barbed wire, trying to make a wide-enough gap in the dense tangle for the squad to get through and take cover behind the wall. But Summerfield knew there wasn't enough time. She stood fully upright, shouted to the squad, 'Spread out!'

They stared at her blankly. Only Ge'von nodded, and began to run back up the shallow slope, away from the barbed wire.

'Sergeant?' asked Holder, puzzled.

Summerfield could hear the irregular hiss of steam escaping from the leg joints of the ground-engine, the creak and clatter of the metal body as it shifted up and down. 'If we're scattered he can't get us all at once,' she said quickly.

'If a few of us can get within rifle range - '

P'skeo and Ji'taj nodded, stood up, ran in opposite directions along the barbed wire. Holder ran after P'skeo; the two Ogrons stayed where they were.

'Where do we go, Sergeant?' asked Iggh.

A machine-gun crackled from the direction of the ground-engine. There was no time for messing about, Benny decided. ‘Just stay there!’ she yelled, then ran up the slope, keeping her head low. She could see Ge’von ahead, and the bulky form of the ground-engine almost directly behind him.

Well within rifle range. Good.

A splutter of machine-gun fire sent her sprawling to the ground. She felt the heavy bullets thud into the mud around her, too near for comfort. She rolled on to her back, saw the dark shadow of the boiler blotting out half the sky.

Far too near, you idiot, she thought. I could get you from here with a peashooter. And: get the leg joints. Paralyse the bugger.

She took the best aim she could at the moving target and fired. Once - reload - twice - reload -

The engine was gone, out of range. She heard more shots ahead of her as the Ogrons also emptied their guns.

There was a metallic clang, and a loud hissing: Benny saw steam gouting from a bullet hole in the boiler, actually watched the cracks propagating in the metal, like thin black tendrils of ivy. Holding her breath, she waited for the boiler to explode.

It didn’t.

She ran down the slope to the Ogrons’ position by the barbed wire. The hairy idiots were already trying to push their way through the barrier, and getting themselves entangled in it.

‘Bounty!’ they shouted. ‘Our bounty!’

Summerfield yelled after them: ‘It might blow up any second! Stay clear!’ From the corner of her eye, she saw Ji’taj returning, the wire cutters still in his hand. She put a hand up to indicate that he should wait, then looked around to check on the others. They were all visible, none more than about fifty metres away. She beckoned them in, saw Holder and Ji’taj cautiously begin to creep forward.

Ge’von didn’t move.

Summerfield frowned, then started up the slope towards the Biune. As she got closer, she could see that he was injured. She increased her

speed to a run, saw the dark bloodstains on the front of Ge'von's uniform.

His head turned slightly as she crouched down over him, and amber blood leaked from his mouth. One of the chitin shields over his eyes was cracked, the green fading to frosty white as Benny watched.

'Well done, Sergeant,' he said, his voice bubbling through the blood. 'It was a good plan.'

Then he stopped breathing.

Benny swallowed. A peaceful species, she thought. Not used to war. She wondered what they were doing here, then wondered where 'here' was. The Doctor had asked her The Doctor?

There was the sound of a revolver shot from the direction of the wrecked ground-engine. Summerfield turned quickly, saw that the door of the cabin was open. She saw a glint of metal moving behind it, and a fraction of a second later heard another shot. One of the Biune turned and fired at the doorway. Summerfield aimed her own rifle, though the range was extreme, but there was nothing to aim at. She took Ge'von's rifle from his dead hands and hurried down the slope, suddenly aware that her squad needed her. She shouldn't have let herself be distracted for so long by the loss of one individual.

The Ogrons were through the barbed wire now, clambering over the cabin on the opposite side to the door.

One of them reached down from the doorway and pulled at something: Summerfield heard a shrill voice shouting, 'Run, Josef! Leave me!'

A girl's voice, Benny realized. A human voice.

There was another shot. Summerfield saw one of the Ogrons lifting a small blue-uniformed figure from the cabin doorway.

'Rations!' he laughed. 'Extra rations!' He threw the body into the air, caught it again. The captive made a choking scream. Summerfield saw a second small figure, also human, scramble from the cabin door to the ground, a revolver in its hand. She raised her rifle and took aim.

'Josef! Look out! Run!' yelled the girl.

Yes, thought Benny, look out, you stupid little boy, or I'll have to

shoot you.

The boy turned and stared at her. Benny crouched down, fired a warning shot at his feet. He jumped, turned and sprinted away across the mud towards the cover of the wall.

Summerfield lowered her rifle: the boy was almost out of range, and anyway no longer an immediate threat to her unit.

She looked up and saw the girl still struggling in Iggh's arms.

As she watched, Urggh clambered over the wrecked cabin, grabbed one of the child's arms and pulled. The child screamed once more. Urggh pulled harder.

No, thought Benny. They can't be going to do it. They can't be.

The two Ogrons pulled with all their strength, and the arm snapped out of its socket. Deep red blood sprayed Urggh in the face. The victim made a terrible gurgling sound.

Benny felt her stomach heave. Without thinking, she raised her rifle, aimed it at Urggh.

The Ogron looked at her. ‘Save your ammunition for the other one,’ he said, then took the child’s head in both hands and twisted.

There was a hollow snap. The head lolled and a trickle of dark blood issued from the mouth.

Words rose in Benny’s throat, words and an incoherent, blazing anger. But they never made it to her mouth.

Something choked them off, blocked her throat, stifling her.

The girl was the enemy, after all.

But -

She crumpled to the ground, felt the mud against her cheek, her hands. ‘Doctor,’ she muttered. ‘Doctor, we’re going to have to stop this.’

She coughed, then was violently sick. She stared at the steaming vomit for several seconds, then looked up, saw Ji’taj standing over her, his teeth bared in puzzlement.

‘What are you instructions, Sergeant?’ he asked. ‘Should we pursue the fugitive?’

But Benny only shook her head, wiped her lips with her sleeve. ‘Peace,’ she said. ‘There has to be peace.’

Ji’taj bared his teeth again. ‘I’m sorry, Sergeant. I don’t understand your order. What does that word mean, “Peace”?’

The Doctor would know, thought Benny. Ask the Doctor.

If only she could remember who the Doctor was.

The girl in the red dress folded her arms around herself and tried to remember who she was. She had a name: Amanda, or Manda. And another name: Sutton. She had a teddy bear, called Frederick. Except that - she held the furry toy up and looked into its green eyes - this one wasn’t Frederick. There was another one called Frederick. Somewhere. Somewhere before -

Before here.

She looked around her, trying to make sense of it. There were four walls, made of orange brick, and a stone-flagged floor, which was rather muddy. Dull daylight came in from a high, barred window. A rusty metal door was set into one wall. Manda went over to the door and pulled at it, but wasn't surprised to find it was locked.

That was bad. She was sure of it. She ought to be afraid.

She ought to be outraged. But the words bounced off her mind, bringing only echoes of the emotions they were supposed to evoke, like the rumbling of a distant storm.

Manda put her hand to her forehead, felt the two strange marks there. They itched slightly. She remembered the drill touching her forehead, digging into her. The pain, her own voice screaming, screaming for Mummy, for Charles, for Daddy, for anyone to please please help -

Best not to think of it.

But why not? demanded Manda fiercely of the inner voice. The voice kept telling her not to think of things. But what had happened was terrible. It was frightening. She had to know the truth about it. She had to know or she would never get out of here. Never ever go back to -

Mummy? Charles?

But no images came to mind. She must have known these people when she'd screamed their names.

There was a mistake. But it's best not to think about it.

The mistake will be corrected soon.

Shut up, she told the inner voice.

Best not to -

Manda imagined the voice coming from the green-eyed teddy bear and in a sudden temper threw the toy across the cell. It bounced off the wall and landed on its head, continued to stare at her.

Mistakes are always corrected.

It's best not to think about it.

You will be reassigned shortly.

Manda closed her eyes, clenched her fists so that her long nails bit into the palms of her hands.

Two days, she thought. I've been wearing this dress for *two* days. This is my *second* day here. I've got to remember that. It's *important*. And Charles - there was a photograph -

There were sounds outside the cell. Manda opened her eyes and stood up. Her legs felt shaky, weak. When did I last have anything to eat? she thought.

There was the sound of bolts being drawn, and the door clattered open. Two of the big teddy bear animals - animals, thought Manda fiercely, stifling some internal correction -

came into the cell. One carried a gun, the other took Manda's arms and lifted her up off the ground. She struggled, kicking at the horrible thing, but her feet hit hard metal armour.

'Let me go!' she bawled. 'Let me go! Take me back to where I came from!'

'There's nothing to worry about,' said the animal in a booming voice. 'You are to be reassigned now.'

The second animal had unrolled something on the floor.

Manda saw a canvas stretcher, restraining straps, bloodstains.

She screamed. 'No! No! No!'

Mistakes are always corrected. It's best not to think about it. Mistakes are always corrected.

Struggling, Manda was strapped down. She managed to bite one of her captors, got a mouthful of silky hair and almost choked.

Then she was being carried, strapped to the stretcher, out through the metal door and into a brick-walled corridor.

Globes on the ceiling gave a dim yellow illumination. Manda watched them, counted them. Anything to fight back the hysteria. Anything that she would be able to hold on to, to *remember*.

After - after -

Mistakes are always corrected.

The stretcher stopped, turned. A doorway, metal frame.

Another dimly lit room. The stretcher was placed on a hard surface, some way above ground level.

A voice: ‘This is the one that’s been causing you problems?’

A human voice. A man’s voice. Manda’s heart surged with hope. Perhaps -

‘There was a mistake with the training, Sergeant - Doctor Smith. She isn’t ready for combat.’

‘Oh, well then, we’ll have to see what we can do about that.’

The voice had a slight Scottish accent. It was the voice of an educated man. A gentleman.

‘Please,’ said Manda. ‘Please, sir, don’t do this to me. Let me go home.’

A face appeared above hers. A tired, world-weary face, with two small but bright scars on the forehead. Blue-grey eyes regarded her calmly, dispassionately.

‘Please,’ said Manda again. She could see the drill now, a silver shape in the corner of her vision. She could hear it whining. The memory of pain made her feel sick.

‘But it’s for your own good,’ said the Sergeant-Doctor softly. ‘I know it hurts, but it’s only for a while. Then you’ll be trained, and you can be reassigned.’

He stood up, spat on his hands and rubbed them together. Then he picked up the drill and lowered it towards Manda’s forehead.

‘No,’ moaned Manda, but the man didn’t pause. The pain began, and it was worse than last time. Manda tried to scream, couldn’t.

Then the pain drowned everything.

Chapter 9

It was no good, thought Madame Mathilde Detaze. She was going to

have to do it.

She liked her job, as cook and housekeeper to Jean-Pierre and Nadienne Douel, but now that Louis had come out and actually asked her to marry him, she knew she had no choice but to make arrangements to leave and join him at his farm. There weren't very many men around, and she liked Louis well enough. Still, it was going to be difficult. She liked the Douels; especially she liked Amalie.

She felt so sorry for her, this woman who had lost her child, and who had not given up hope even after six months had passed.

Mathilde took a deep breath of the night air, looked back for the last time at the lights of the farmhouse where Louis lived, then shook her head and walked on towards Larochepot.

As she passed the new metal sign announcing the village she saw that the lamps were still lit at her mistress's house. Good. That meant that Amalie would still be up, then.

They could talk. Amalie talked a lot, sometimes about her missing daughter, sometimes about other things.

But she was always kind, she was always knowing, she saw into your soul and she usually liked what she saw. She would understand, she would make it easier for Mathilde to break the news to the Douels.

Mathilde was close enough to the house now to see that not only were the lamps alight, but the upstairs shutters were wide open, and the main door.

Now that was odd. It wasn't like Madame Douel to leave the shutters open - she hated the insects coming in and would often smoke the rooms to discourage them, even though it made everybody cough. But leaving the shutters open and the lamps lit like that was bound to encourage insects.

She stopped, there in the middle of the main street, and frowned. Was something wrong? Had something happened to Madame Douel - to the baby-?

She started to hurry towards the house, almost running.

When she reached the garden gate, breathing hard, she knew at once that something *was* wrong. There was a silence about the place: too much silence. Even at night it wasn't this quiet. She walked slowly

towards the open main door, leaning forward and peering into the hallway beyond.

'Madame!' she called. 'Monsieur! It's me, Mathilde!'

There was no response. Mathilde looked over her shoulder at the dark shape of the church. There was a lamp on in the priest's house: she wondered if she should fetch Father Duvalle.

But instead she carried on through the doorway into the hall. She frowned at a white lady's hat with pink ribbons abandoned at the bottom of the stairs, then picked it up and, carrying it in one hand, walked through to the kitchen. There was a cloying smell of herbs and meat in there: Mathilde recognized stew, the stew she had given Amalie the recipe for, the stew that should have been eaten long ago. It smelled stale, old. She looked on the stove, saw the pot sitting on the warming plate. Mathilde stared at it for a moment, then called again: 'Amalie! Madame Douel!'

There was still no answer. Mathilde's heart began to beat faster than was comfortable. Help, she thought. I must get help. She thought of the priest again and hurried out of the house, down the path and across the narrow street.

'Father Duvalle! Holy Father!' She was shouting it now, not caring if the whole village heard. Better if it did.

Something terrible had happened, Mathilde was sure of that.

She hurried through the gate, along the drive.

Hesitated when she saw that the front door was open.

'Holy Father!' she called again. Then went to the open door and knocked.

The hallway was dark and silent. Mathilde called out once more, then walked in, trying to still the sound of her breathing. The drawing-room door was ajar, the lamp lit; stepping inside she saw a book open on the table, a glass of red wine by its side. The chair was pushed back, as if the priest had got up hastily.

Perhaps he was at the Douels', thought Mathilde.

Perhaps someone had died and –

No. They would have heard her calling.

She returned to the hallway, called the priest's name again. She felt a cold breath of air on her back, realized that the back door of the house was also open. Had Father Duvalle gone to the church? She walked out of the back door and along the path, through the gate into the churchyard. As she reached the porch she tripped and almost fell over something large and soft.

She cried out, then halted, teetering to keep her balance.

Over the hammering of her heart and the heaving of her lungs she heard a faint, bubbling sigh coming from beneath her and realized that she was standing over the body of a man.

She could see a face now, a faint pale shape in the darkness. She struggled to control her breathing, kneeled down by the side of the figure and heard another breath, then a faint, whispery voice.

'- devils - '

'Father Duvalle?'

There was a moment's silence, another hoarse breath, then, 'Go! Go before they take you too!' A pause. 'Godless animals - servants of Lucifer himself - I refused them - I will die but I will not be taken-'

'Father, are you hurt?' But she knew he was. She searched below his face with her hands, found his neck. The skin was wet, and her hands came away sticky and dark.

'Go now - they have taken all the others -' the voice faded away.

Mathilde felt her body begin to shake. The chill returned to her belly despite the heat of her exertions. She opened her mouth to form a question, to ask for reassurance, but her voice wouldn't work.

The body beneath her gave a shuddering breath, then was silent.

'Father?' Mathilde put her hands to the priest's chest, felt a warm, sticky fluid and sodden cloth beneath, but no movement. 'Father!' She began pummelling the body, shouting incoherently, until her hands and the front of her dress were covered in blood.

She started screaming then, screaming aloud to anyone who would listen, to anyone who would save her; but there was no answer.

Mathilde remembered the priest's words:

'they have taken all the others'. She walked out into the road, began calling out the names of the villagers she knew. Then she ran up the main street, ran faster than she would have believed possible, because she knew she had to get away from it, get away before it came back, go to Louis and tell him

–

She saw the shadow in the road too late. It was only yards away. Mathilde froze in terror, stared at the huge, inhuman figure, the green eyes that seemed to glow in the moonlight, and began to beg for mercy.

But of course that was exactly the wrong thing to do.

Martineau looked like a good cop, Roz decided. But a good cop under pressure. It wasn't warm in the interrogation cell, but there were beads of perspiration on the man's forehead.

His uniform was creased and the jacket cuffs were dirty; it looked as if he'd been wearing it all night. He'd taken off his cap and put it down on the wooden tabletop, and was drumming his fingers on the brim. He looked tired, fed up and

- Roz was fairly sure

- a little bit frightened. His eyes were fixed on Chris, who was sitting opposite him, handcuffed to a chair. For some reason, Roz didn't rate a chair, though they hadn't forgotten the handcuffs.

Shame about that, she thought.

Now, these disappearances that you claim to be investigating,' Martineau was saying. 'They are happening all over Europe?'

'All over the world, sir,' said Chris.

Roz liked the 'sir'. It was just Chris being Chris, she knew, but it was a good piece of diplomacy too. They needed this man on their side, or they were likely to spend a long time in jail. Roz had already spent one night in the local cells and she didn't fancy any more.

'All over the world? Are the Reds behind it?'

'The reds?' Chris was bewildered.

Roz silently cursed the inadequacy of the Doctor's history briefings. 'We don't know who's behind it,' she said quickly. 'That's one of the things we're trying to find out.'

Martineau gave her a cold glance, then looked away. It was almost as if she didn't exist. She'd noticed that look amongst the gendarmes last night, and before that sometimes on the streets of Larochepot and Septangy: some people acted as if - well, as if she were an offworlder. She was more puzzled than offended. She didn't *look* alien, did she? Her type was probably more genetically true to the average of this period than Chris's - yet Chris was invariably treated with respect. Even when they'd arrested him, they'd been polite. Her, they'd prodded and poked and treated like an animal.

'Do you have any idea what's happening to the people?

When they vanish, are they dead, or are they being taken somewhere?' There was a note of desperation in the gendarme's voice: Roz wondered if it was genuine, or whether the man was trying to appeal to their better nature.

She took another look at Martineau's tired face, and decided that something really was up.

'As far as we know, they're taken somewhere,' Chris was saying. 'We're not sure where.' He paused. 'But we did discover that they're using toy bears to disguise the apparatus.'

The gendarme's eyebrows shot up. Roz winced. So much for getting him on their side.

'The bears are the pick-up end of a matter transporter,'

Chris went on, apparently unconscious of the effect his words were having. 'It's probably a dimensional wormhole system.

The multicoloured flash is characteristic of that kind of device.

But if that's the case, the device depends on mm'x crystals resonating at a fixed frequency, which means there's no way of discriminating between one device and another in a given area once the field is applied. And it was applied last night, when Amalie's murderer was picked up. I wouldn't be surprised if you'd lost a few other people.'

There was a prolonged silence. Roz looked up at the high, barred window of the interrogation room, saw a strip of grey, cloudy sky. If

Chris was right it would only need one signal to pick up every kid cuddling his or her teddy bear from here to London and back.

At last Martineau spoke. ‘Our officers went to Larochepot in the early hours of this morning, to investigate last night’s events and examine Madame Govier’s body. They found the village empty of people. Everyone had gone, except the priest, who was dead.’

Roz noticed the way that, as he spoke, the gendarme watched Chris without seeming to: he wasn’t too tired, then, not to be aware that this news might be no surprise to his suspects. Fortunately Chris’s amazed ‘Oh!’ followed by a puzzled, ‘I don’t understand how they could do that,’ was convincing enough. Roz was pretty sure that, in Martineau’s position, she’d have been convinced.

But Martineau showed no outward sign of being persuaded either way. He simply stared into the middle distance, tapping his hands on the tabletop.

Roz decided it was time to make another contribution to the conversation, whether Martineau liked it or not. ‘What I don’t understand,’ she said, ‘is why they did it. They couldn’t think of a better way to attract attention if they tried.’

Martineau looked at her, looked at her properly for the first time. ‘You’re right,’ he said simply. ‘Our concern, of course, is that if they are not afraid to show their hand so dramatically, then whatever it is they have planned -’ He broke off, shrugged.

Roz nodded, finished his sentence for him ‘- is something big, and it’s due to happen soon. Very soon.’

Martineau didn’t reply, just stared at the desktop. Roz held her breath: it was a tough decision for the man to have to make, whether to trust them. If he got it wrong, a lot of lives were on the line.

‘It might be worth checking on the toy shop, Parmentier’s,’ Chris said suddenly, apparently innocent of the subtext of the conversation. ‘It’s here in Touleville, on the main street - the address is on the last page of my notebook, the one you took last night. It’s underlined. Ask them if they still have their stock - if they do, buy one and bring it here.’

Martineau still didn’t speak: Chris looked over his shoulder, said, ‘What do you think, Roz?’

Roz shrugged, gestured at the gendarme.

Martineau looked up. He took a handkerchief out of his jacket pocket, slowly wiped the sweat from his forehead, put the handkerchief away again. Finally he said, 'Perhaps it would be best if you looked at this shop for yourselves.' He paused. 'Under guard, of course; I will have to accompany you.'

Roz couldn't quite repress a slight smile. 'I think you'd better take our handcuffs off first, don't you?'

But Martineau didn't reply. He didn't even look at her. He just set about releasing Chris from the chair, as if she wasn't even there.

As soon as they arrived at Parmentier's, Roz knew that Chris's hunch had been right. The big window display was half empty. The lines of clockwork soldiers, of wooden and china dolls, were still there, but the centrepiece, the teddy bears' picnic, was missing its star performers.

'No teddy bears,' said Chris triumphantly.

A handwritten notice on the glass door displayed the message 'Closed for Stocktaking', but when Martineau knocked, a young woman in a pink-and-blue dress opened the door to them.

'You have come at last,' she said, addressing Martineau.

'Monsieur Parmentier is waiting to see you.' She glanced curiously at Roz and Chris, said, ' *Bonjour*, madame, monsieur. I'm afraid we're - '

'They are with me,' said Martineau.

The assistant frowned, shrugged, then led them into the shop, locking the door behind them. Inside, her colleagues were indeed stocktaking, counting the rows and rows of dolls, toy soldiers, golliwogs, rocking-horses and wooden bricks.

Beside the elaborate airfield with its painted wooden biplanes that was set in the centre of the shop, one of the assistants was on her knees, notebook and pencil in hand, muttering,

'Thirty Fokkers, twelve de Havillands, so that's - '

Roz imagined Amalie in the shop, looking at the teddy bears, realizing, as she'd said, that 'these were the ones'.

She imagined her chatting to the assistant, swapping comments about

the high price of food and the weather, and felt a lump rise in her throat. Amalie had brought so much sunshine to so many people. Even though she knew it was impossible, she felt as if she should grab hold of the Doctor whenever he turned up and tell him to go back in the TARDIS

and collect Amalie, save her from dying -

But she'd seen the woman die, and knew it couldn't be reversed, even with a time machine. She knew enough about what couldn't be reversed, what couldn't be avoided, now.

Enough to last her for the rest of her life.

Anyway, she reminded herself, they might not have access to a time machine any more.

Monsieur Parmentier was waiting in his office, a scowl on his face. He was a large, middle-aged man, wearing a black morning coat, a striped waistcoat and striped trousers.

'I reported the incident over an hour ago,' he said, without waiting for introductions. 'I cannot imagine what the police have been doing.'

'We have had other - ' began Martineau.

'What incident?' interrupted Roz. She wasn't going to let the gendarme take over the investigation just because he was wearing a uniform.

'"What incident?"' Parmentier looked at Roz, frowned, looked back at Martineau. 'I telephoned the police station!

Telephoned!' He gestured at the black instrument on his desk, as if he were especially proud of it. 'All the teddy bears in our stock are missing! They said they would come at once!'

'OK,' said Roz, 'so we're here now, so calm down. Has anything else gone missing?'

Parmentier frowned at Roz again, stubbornly replied to Martineau. 'I'm checking on that.' He gestured through the door, which had been left open, to the shop and the busily counting assistants.

'Any signs of forced entry?' chipped in Chris.

Parmentier actually looked at him as he replied, 'Not as far as I can

tell. But these cat-burglars' he shrugged '- you know.'

'Cat-burglars?' asked Roz sharply. 'Some sort of offworlder?'

'No space travel,' muttered Chris quickly, just at the same moment as Roz remembered it.

Parmentier - and Martineau - looked at them in evident bewilderment.

Roz said quickly, 'These teddy bears - who supplies them?'

'Universal Toys of New York.' Parmentier glanced at the floor. 'It is an American firm.'

'Not English?'

'No, definitely American. I can supply the address of their Paris branch if it helps.' He opened a drawer in his desk, removed a white printed card.

Roz looked at Parmentier's face as he handed the card over to Martineau, saw the beads of sweat on his forehead, the tension lines around his mouth. He's lying, she thought, and he's not very good at it either. Obviously his indignation, his prompt phone call to the police, had simply been an attempt to bluff it out. He knew there was something special about the toys that had been 'stolen'.

Martineau was examining the card; looking at it over his shoulder, Roz saw that it said 'UNIVERSAL TOYS - Charles Sutton, Sales Representative', followed by a printed address.

A tiny image of a teddy bear stared at her with two tiny, green-glinting eyes. She nodded to herself, glanced at Chris.

Martineau slipped the card inside his notebook.

'I think we'd better keep that,' said Roz quietly.

Parmentier glanced at her, then looked up at the gendarme, his face uncertain. 'Who are these people, Officer?'

'Private investigators,' said Martineau. 'They are assisting me in this matter.'

'But what have private investigators to do with this theft?

I didn't ask for them to be involved!'

Martineau turned to Chris. ‘Perhaps you’d better leave for the time being, Mr Cwej. Let me handle this.’

Chris glanced up at Roz, who shrugged.

‘Why are they involved?’ Parmentier was saying. ‘What are they doing?’

The panic in his voice was evident: Roz glanced at Martineau and saw that the man hadn’t missed it. She raised her eyebrows fractionally.

Chris said, ‘Monsieur Parmentier, did you know that the entire population of the village of Larochepot has disappeared?’

Roz turned, saw that Parmentier’s face had crumpled, and knew that her partner had hit the spot. That was something Parmentier hadn’t been told about by his comrades.

‘But -’ said Parmentier. ‘But that’s -’ He began shaking his head, then stood up suddenly. ‘Out of my shop!’ he roared. ‘Out now! - And you, Officer, if you don’t mind. I will call on you later.’

Martineau nodded, grabbed Roz’s arm. She shook off his grip, leaned forward, put her elbows on the wooden desk, and spoke quietly to the shop owner. ‘How about if you tell us, Monsieur Parmentier? It might not be so bad. We might decide to forget all about your part in it if you just tell us what’s happening.’

But even before she’d finished speaking, Roz knew she’d pushed Parmentier too far. He just stared at her, his pale face indignant, and said quietly, ‘Get out. Get out of my office. Get out of my shop.’

Roz stood up straight and looked at Martineau, who ignored her and said to Chris, ‘I think we must leave, Mr Cwej.’

She gave the gendarme a poisonous glance, turned and stormed out of the office, pushing past the assistant and almost trampling over the model airfield in her fury. The others followed her.

‘What now?’ she said sourly as they stepped out into the street. Under the shade of one of the plane trees that lined the roadway, a little boy was eating an apple and staring at her curiously.

‘We go back to the police station,’ said Martineau. ‘You don’t understand. Monsieur Parmentier is a friend of the mayor. You can’t accuse him like that, without any evidence.’

‘I don’t care if his girlfriend’s President of the Solar System!’ snapped Roz. ‘He’s up to something and I want him nailed for it!’

‘I cannot allow you to bully respectable citizens in this manner. Especially I cannot allow your assistant to do it.’

It was a moment after he had spoken the last phrase that Roz realized that the gendarme was yet again talking to Chris. She turned to Martineau, stood on tiptoe and pushed her face close to his. ‘I’m not his assistant, Monsieur. We’re partners. And you can talk to me directly. I’m intelligent. I talk back.’

‘Yes, that’s the problem with you,’ sneered Martineau.

‘You talk back. Too often.’

Roz stared at him for a while, until Chris caught her arm and pulled her away. ‘Come on, Roz,’ he said quietly. ‘We need these people’s help.’

Roz resisted for a moment, then let Chris lead her away.

Martineau followed them, his boots clicking on the paving stones. As they passed the plane tree, the little boy standing there threw his apple core down and began jumping up and down, scratching his armpits and hooting like a chimpanzee, all the while staring at Roz.

She shook her head slowly. What was it with these people?

As soon as the gendarme and his two unorthodox companions had left the shop, Monsieur Parmentier shut the door of his office and picked up the earpiece of the black telephone on his desk. He wound the dial until the crackly voice of the operator could be heard.

‘Get me a Paris line,’ he shouted into the mouthpiece.

‘Quickly.’

The operator told him that there wasn’t a line available.

‘Well, make one available,’ snapped Parmentier. ‘It’s extremely urgent.’ His hands were beginning to shake again.

Thank goodness the gendarme hadn’t noticed. Why had he ever reported it to the police? He could have explained it away to the shop staff somehow. Involving the police had been a stupid thing to do.

One of the girls stuck her head round the door: Parmentier waved her away, ‘Later - later.’ She mouthed the words ‘nothing else missing’ and closed the door.

At last the operator got a line to Paris. Parmentier had to wait a few more moments, listening to distant, echoing conversations between operators, before he got the number he wanted.

It was answered at once.

‘Parmentier here,’ he said. His voice was shaking now.

He swallowed, struggling to control it. ‘The word is “Teddy Bear”.’

There was a pause, then the voice began speaking rapidly, in the guttural Slavic tongue that Parmentier had once spoken, long ago when he’d had a different name. He was not altogether surprised to discover that the factory knew about his problem already, and that matters were in hand. He listened carefully to his instructions, which as well as being in the foreign language were encoded in phrases about delivery dates, quantities and toy soldiers. As he took in the meaning of the phrases, the blood slowly drained from his face.

‘You want me to -’ he began, then choked off the remark.

‘The delivery must be made, or plans for the sales recruitment operation will be severely disrupted,’ said the voice.

Parmentier’s hands were trembling again, but he managed to keep his voice steady as he said, ‘Very well. I will close the shop for today and make the necessary arrangements.’

‘We will free the world’s children,’ concluded the voice, in French.

‘Yes, we will free them,’ replied Parmentier, and the line went dead.

He stood up slowly, walked to the door, locked it, then went to a roll-top bureau set against the wall, unlocked the bottom drawer and lifted out a file full of papers and a locked steel box. He opened the box, took out the little Derringer pistol and stared at it for a while.

I don’t want to do this, he thought. I promised Marie that I would never do this again. That I would leave it to the others.

But he knew he couldn’t do that. He had his orders. He had no choice.

His fingers still trembling a little, he began taking the bullets from the

metal case and loading them into the gun.

Chapter 10

This time it wasn't going to work.

Gabrielle felt a tightening in her stomach, a sense of panic which she knew she ought to be able to control. She kept her hand on the stick, her foot on the rudder pedal, keeping the plane in as tight a turn as possible. Behind her, the enemy plane kept pace, the deadly wing-mounted guns flickering from time to time. Fifteen hundred metres below, the ground was a crumpled plain of sun-baked earth, scored with the thin lines of trenches.

He must have some kind of remote control for those wing guns, thought Gabrielle. And a lot of ammunition - he's fired at least ten seconds' worth. She wondered how it was done, why the guns didn't jam. Elreek would have known, she thought. And Elreek would have done something about it: he would have given her guns that were just as good. But Elreek had been reassigned.

The guns behind her flickered again, and Gabrielle felt the thud of bullets hitting the fuselage. It was only a matter of time until something vital was hit, and then -

Gabrielle swallowed. There was no way out. Not with those guns. He'd follow her all the way to the ground if he had to, just to make sure.

She pulled at the throttle cable, felt the engine shudder as it accelerated beyond its limits. She had to get in tighter, turn faster than the enemy, get behind him. It was the only way.

Looking over her shoulder, she saw that the enemy plane was a little further back, and at more of an angle to her.

But there was still no way that she was going to get a shot at him: and as she watched, he was gaining again, the angle decreasing. She could see the pilot, a Kreeta in brown leathers, huge eyes hidden behind tinted goggles.

More out of sheer frustration than anything else, Gabrielle drew her handgun from its pocket in her own leathers and took a bead on the pilot over the tail of her plane. She fired; at the same moment the enemy's guns flickered again and more bullets hit the fuselage. But

Gabrielle saw the pilot slump in his seat, and felt a deep thrill of triumph. She'd got him! Against all the odds!

But she didn't let the feeling of triumph distract her from the job in hand. The enemy plane might go out of control, or the pilot might recover and take another shot at her. Either way she'd be safer above him. She pulled back on the stick, felt it move easily in her hand.

Far too easily.

The feeling of panic in Gabrielle's stomach returned.

Control cable's broken, she thought. She glanced down, saw a ragged hole in the floor of the cockpit, the loose end of the cable attached to the stick curled up like a snake around it.

She couldn't see the other end, the one attached to the elevators. Which meant it was outside: she had no chance of grabbing hold of it, no chance of controlling the plane. The plane's nose dropped, slowly, irregularly, as the elevators lost trim.

Dead, thought Gabrielle. I'm as good as dead. And: at least I got him first.

But her hands hadn't given up. They were closing the throttle, shuffling the stick to try and control the dive using the flaps.

Not a chance, she thought. Less than fifteen hundred metres, and no way of bringing the nose up. But still she carried on, keeping the plane level, throttling back so as to slow the dive. She saw the enemy plane tumbling past her, out of control, saw it corkscrew unsteadily to the ground and impact in a blossom of flame.

She thought about that, about that happening to her, and found herself unhitching her straps and crouching down in the cockpit, her hand punching at the hole in the floor where the control cable had passed through. She gripped a broken piece of wood, pulled, felt the spar snap further down. She pulled at the loose piece, watched it fall away revealing a hole big enough to reach through.

With one hand still on the stick, and the plane keeling to one side, she reached through, scrabbled around on the cold, flapping canvas. The cable had to be there somewhere: it was attached to the frame at regular spaces by metal eyelets.

The plane lurched from side to side; twice Gabrielle had to get up to

stabilize the dive. Each time the ground was closer.

But she didn't give up, couldn't give up because -

- I want to live I don't want to die Mamma I'll come back now I'll have my photograph taken I don't want to die -

At last her hand closed over the cable. Her heart hammering, she pulled forward, slowly, steadily. Too fast and it would slip away from her. Too slow and she'd hit the ground before she'd regained control.

At last the end of the cable was through the hole in the floor; but Gabrielle quickly realized that she had another problem. The plane was still diving: the random slack in the elevators had been replaced by a controlled dive. If she pulled the cable any further forward it would start to dive steeply - and would probably hit the ground before she could do anything. Even if she let the cable back so that the plane's nose came up, a controlled landing descent was impossible: she couldn't see where she was going and hold the cable in the position for a landing at the same time.

She looked at the broken ends of the cable and wondered if she could tie them together. She wedged the stick between her knees, pulled the slack cable attached to the stick and made a loop in it. Awkwardly, she secured the loop, using her other hand as a wedge. The floor of the cockpit sloped more steeply: she could hear the engine screaming as the accelerating slipstream took the prop. But she couldn't let go of the cable assembly to attend to the throttle.

She threaded the control cable through the loop, and, holding it down with her wrist, made a loop in that too. Then she knotted the loops as best she could, gradually let them take the strain.

They held.

She scrambled into the seat, eased the stick back, felt the dive level out. Just in time, she thought: the ground was only a hundred and fifty metres below.

Time to land, and quickly.

She eased the stick forward a little, felt the linkage slip.

Her stomach lurched -

- but although the nose dropped, the plane stayed in trim.

She saw rough mud below her, a brick wall, a wrecked ground-engine. For a moment she thought she was at the site of yesterday's raid; but no, the ground was flatter, and there was no sign of intensive shelling, or indeed of much activity of any kind. This was a quiet part of the front.

Good.

Gabrielle waited until the ground was thirty metres below, then switched off the engine. The ground looked quite smooth, but it was muddy: the plane might turn over. A glide down was safer. She pulled the stick back.

Felt the linkages slip again.

The plane lurched sideways, hit the ground wing first.

Gabrielle saw the sea of mud stewing sideways, and incredibly close a pile of bricks and mud and barbed wire.

Then the ground was rushing past above her head, and she was falling. She grabbed the wooden frame of the cockpit, screamed with pain as something dug into her side. Her other shoulder was pressed into something soft: mud, she realized.

The plane had stopped moving. She was down.

She was down and she was still alive. Instantly, she started to struggle free of the cockpit straps. She wriggled experimentally, slipped, fell a short distance. She could see a long wedge of daylight in front of her, formed by a wing, the ground, and the side of the engine cowling.

She struggled, but couldn't drag her body forward the metre or so she needed to get out into the open. Something was pinning her in place, biting into her hip and her stomach: the side of the cockpit, she supposed. She tried wriggling backwards, but couldn't move that way either. She floundered desperately in the wet mud, her back hurting, her whole body shaking, but there seemed to be no way out.

Then she saw the red-and-yellow legs of the uniform of an enemy footsoldier standing by the engine cowling, a few metres in front of her.

Gabrielle felt her lip quiver. To have survived so much danger, to have been so lucky, and now this -

She tried to draw her revolver, but she couldn't get her arm under her body. As she struggled to lift herself the necessary few centimetres, the enemy crouched down. A torso came into view, then an arm balancing a field rifle, finally a face. The face was human: dark-eyed and dark-haired under the yellow helmet. A woman's face, Gabrielle realized. A sergeant's stripes were painted on to the shoulder of the uniform. Gabrielle made one last effort to reach her gun, but her fingers couldn't quite make contact with the holster. She almost screamed with frustration.

The barrel of the enemy's rifle swung across the narrow gap, until it was almost touching Gabrielle's forehead.

She stopped struggling, froze. Watched the sweat forming on the stranger's face, the uncertainty in her eyes.

Gabrielle wondered what was going through the woman's mind: for some reason she remembered the sick feeling she'd had yesterday, when she'd seen the Ogrons taking away the human pilot she'd killed for food.

Slowly, the woman lowered her rifle. There was obviously something wrong with her: her whole body was shaking. But Gabrielle couldn't see any sign of an injury.

Perhaps she was concussed?

The woman reached out an arm, grabbed hold of Gabrielle's extended hand, and began to pull. Gabrielle cried out as her bruised hips were scraped past wooden struts, then almost choked as her face was pressed into the mud.

Then she was sitting upright, leaning against the side of the plane, blinking at the patch of white glare that was the sun. A hand touched the side of her face, unbuttoned her mask, peeled it back.

'Hello,' said the enemy sergeant. Her voice was thick, choked, as if she'd been crying.

But no one ever cried. Gabrielle felt a pit open up beneath her, a pit which was as deep as the drop from the walls of the Château de Septangy into the village square.

- Mamma wants me for the photograph -

Why hadn't she stayed?

‘Hello,’ repeated the woman, when Gabrielle didn’t respond. ‘My name’s Benny.’ She paused. ‘ *Professor* Benny Summerfield. At your service. And you’re a very, very, very lucky little girl.’

Then the enemy soldier picked up the rifle and put it across her knee. As Gabrielle watched in astonishment which rapidly turned to disbelief, she unloaded the rifle and then, with the stock still hinged back, pulled at the stock and the barrel until the hinge twisted out of shape, rendering the rifle unusable. Breathing hard, she then planted the broken weapon in the mud, before slowly collapsing sideways to lie beside it, unconscious.

Gabrielle stared at the body, then reached down to the revolver at her waist and swiftly drew it from its holster.

Her duty was clear.

Manda Sutton woke up with a headache. It was a really bad one, as if someone had drilled into her skull. She felt feverish, too, and she could hardly make out the familiar shape of her wardrobe in the dim light.

She called out: ‘Mummy! I’ve got a headache!’

‘Ah! That’s a good sign,’ said an unfamiliar voice.

Manda wanted to protest that it was *not* a good sign, that on the contrary it meant that she definitely didn’t want to go to school today, but the unfamiliarity of the voice stopped her.

She remembered something now - something about a doctor

-

Then she remembered it all, realized that the shape wasn’t her wardrobe, that the room wasn’t her bedroom. She started to scream.

Two hands took hold of her shoulders, gently but firmly, and to her astonishment Manda felt herself being pulled upright and hugged.

It’s all right now,’ said the voice. ‘It’s really all right.

You’re going to get better.’

Manda sobbed a couple of times, then managed to control her breathing enough to stutter. ‘Am I going home?’

The soothing grip slackened, and the voice said,

'Eventually. It's a possibility.' The man let her go, but kept his hands on her shoulders. Her eyes were working better now, or perhaps the light had got brighter: she could see the sergeant's uniform, the white hat, the level blue eyes staring into hers. 'I'm the Doctor, and you're my friend Manda,' he explained, adding apologetically, 'You're going to have to be my friend, because I seem to have mislaid all my other friends at the moment.'

Manda swallowed, looked around the room, saw bare plaster, a blood-stained floor. She became aware of a smell: a smell of sweat and fear. She became aware that it was hers.

'Where are we?'

'The Recruiter's territory,' said the Doctor solemnly.

'Underground, I think.'

Manda shuddered. 'Are we going to have to escape?'

She tried to imagine running along tunnels, like the London Underground, and men with guns running after her. Bullets flying. Hitting her. What happened when bullets hit you?

What did it feel like? She decided to revise her question: 'Can we escape?'

'Probably.' The Doctor seemed irritated by the question.

His eyes flicked away, towards the metal door opposite the bunk where Manda was sitting. She looked down at her legs, saw mannish trousers, in green and brown. A uniform. She shuddered again, gazed at the Doctor with suspicion. He had hugged her, true, and told her she might be able to go home, but -

He was looking at the door, frowning. He cast her a rapid glance, said in a low voice, 'You know how to play "Let's Pretend"?'

Manda heard the footsteps then, the booming sound of a knock at the door. She nodded quickly.

The Doctor pulled the door open, and a heavy brown-furred figure stepped through. Manda recognized one of the bearlike things that had taken her from her cell. She noticed the sergeant's stripes on the

thing's shoulders, managed a shaky salute, aware that her legs were trembling.

'Has the treatment been successful?' asked the furry thing. She couldn't think of it as a person.

The Doctor nodded. 'But she needs a day of light duties to recover physically. The Recruiter has assigned her to me.'

The wide, bearlike head turned to face Manda. It was impossible to tell if the flat green eyes were really looking at her, but she assumed that they were. Her legs began trembling more violently and a humming noise started in her head. She knew she was going to have to sit down in a minute, or she would faint.

For what purpose?' asked the booming voice.

'Disinfection,' snapped the Doctor, sounding impatient.

'She's going to scrub the floors and the bunks. We've been losing too many recruits to bacterial infections, you know.'

'I know,' said the bearlike thing. It turned away and left the room, closing the door behind it.

The Doctor's eyes met hers and he smiled. Manda tried to smile back, then sat down suddenly on the bunk, shaking, her body covered in a cold sweat.

'What are we going to do?' she asked the Doctor. Her head wasn't humming so loudly now, and she could feel the prickle of blood returning to her cheeks.

He didn't reply for a moment: he had his hat in front of his face, and was staring into the inside of it, head cocked on one side as if he were watching a magic lantern show.

Eventually, with the hat still in place, he said, 'I've got some thinking to do. And you're going to scrub the floor.'

Manda stared at him. 'I'm not a serving-maid,' she protested. Scrubbing the floor felt like a punishment, the sort of thing the prefects had made her do at school when she'd been younger. And her hands were still shaking: she wasn't sure if she was strong enough.

The Doctor lowered his hat so that it was upside-down in front of his

chest and stared at her levelly. ‘I’ll remind you that I’m your commanding officer and that you’ve been assigned to me by the Recruiter to help with disinfection.’

For the second time Manda felt a lurch of panic: had all the friendship, all the hugs and reassurance, been some kind of act?

Then she saw the Doctor’s left eye twitch in the ghost of a wink. She nodded, then thought better of it and saluted.

This was ‘Let’s Pretend’, and she was going to have to practise.

‘Other hand,’ said the Doctor quietly, adding,

‘Fortunately, you got it right last time.’

Manda nodded again, repeated the salute with her right hand.

‘That’s better. Now, clean the floor! At the double!’

Manda looked around her. The room contained the two bunks, a wooden table, a single wooden chair on the seat of which rested a bowl-shaped helmet, which she imagined was the Doctor’s when he wasn’t wearing his hat.

‘Er - what do I clean the floor with?’ she asked. The Doctor looked at the ceiling and whistled softly. After a moment Manda remembered and added, ‘Sir.’

The Doctor frowned, then looked into his hat which he still held upturned in front of his chest. He ferreted around in it for a moment, then pulled out a bright orange washcloth and an equally bright yellow bottle with the word ‘Jif’ written on the side. He handed them to her with a brilliant smile, as if he’d just performed a successful conjuring trick, which Manda supposed he had. She got up, took the cleaning materials, struggled with the unfamiliar green cap on the bottle until the Doctor showed her how to pop it open. She glanced at him once more, then squirted some of the stuff on the bare boards around her feet, got down on her knees and began to scrub.

Josef stared out across the white haze of no man’s land and realized he was thirsty. Very thirsty. Thirstier than he could ever remember being. His throat felt sore and swollen, his tongue felt like a dry rag stuffed into his mouth.

He was going to have to move soon. To move and find some water.

He peered up over the top of the pile of mud and rubble he was hiding behind to take another look at the crashed plane and at the two figures by it. The enemy woman, apparently unconscious, and the pilot, sitting propped up against the engine cowling with a revolver in her hand.

Why didn't the pilot kill the enemy? thought Josef. She was certainly helpless, but he could see her breathing. That meant she was still alive, and had to be killed. She was the enemy.

He remembered the sound Ingrid had made when she died, remembered looking over his shoulder and seeing the enemy Ogrons licking her blood off their lips, and his heart thudded with anger. He hefted the useless handgun, aimed it at the enemy woman, but stopped short of pulling the trigger.

The click of the empty weapon would attract the pilot's attention, and Josef wasn't sure he wanted that. He wasn't sure he could trust someone who didn't kill the enemy.

He shifted his position slowly, trying to get into the shadow of the wall. The back of his neck was itching where the sun had burned it. He wished he could get back to the ground-engine. The boiler was irreparably damaged this time, of course: the rifle shot must have caught it on the temporary patch that had been welded on that morning. But at least there would be shelter, and possibly water. And if the enemy returned to salvage the parts, he might get lucky and be able to kill one of them.

Perhaps if he crawled slowly enough, they wouldn't notice.

'Who's there?' snapped a voice suddenly. A human girl, he realized: obviously the pilot. Josef knew he had to identify himself as a friend, or be shot as an enemy.

'Engineer Josef Tannenbaum,' he said.

There was a pause, then the voice said, 'Pilot Gabrielle Govier. I need your help with something, Engineer.'

Josef stood up. The pilot was also standing, her gun still in her hand. She beckoned, and Josef trotted around the pile of rubble and across the dry mud towards her.

Clear brown eyes looked into his. 'I want you to help me carry the enemy sergeant to the trench.' She gestured behind her to where the

remains of sandbagged fortifications stood, perhaps a hundred metres away.

Josef stared. ‘Why don’t you kill her?’

Gabrielle lowered her eyes. ‘I - can’t,’ she said awkwardly.

‘Why can’t you?’ Josef felt a growing anger. What was the matter with this pilot? Had the crash damaged her brain in some way? ‘She’s the enemy. She has to be killed.’

Gabrielle shook her head. ‘Help me to carry her.’

Josef heard again the hollow snap of Ingrid’s neck, the choking gurgle of her death. He grabbed the pilot’s gun arm, twisted the weapon towards the enemy soldier. ‘You have to kill her!’ he shouted. ‘You have to kill!’

‘I -’ began Gabrielle, but she was interrupted by a distant, terribly familiar, thud, followed a second later by a whistling sound. They both fell silent, staring at each other.

Josef felt rather than heard the shock of the explosion.

Mud splattered his body; he looked up, saw a new crater and a haze of smoke less than fifty metres away. He looked back at Gabrielle, who was struggling to free her arm from his grip.

‘We have to get her to the trench!’ she shouted, the words barely audible over the ringing in Josef s ears.

‘You’re mad!’ he shouted back, letting go of her. ‘Kill her and run for it!’

But the pilot only holstered her gun, lifted the unconscious enemy’s shoulders off the ground and began to drag her across the mud.

‘Run!’ shouted Josef again, uncomprehending. He could hear the whistle of another shell approaching: it was quickly followed by the shudder and thud of a slightly more distant explosion. He himself began to run, heading for the trench, slipping and sliding in the sticky mud. As he reached the sandbagged parapet, he heard the whistle of a third shell, then a bright light flared and a shockwave knocked him flat.

He cowered against the sandbags for a moment, his body trembling

with shock, then slowly got up. The wreck of the plane was gone, replaced by a cloud of black smoke. As Josef watched, the smoke rose into the air, revealing a ball of orange flame and a broken fragment of the fuselage.

So much for the pilot and the enemy soldier, he thought.

He wondered again why she'd been so stupid. She could easily have got away.

He heard the whistle and crump of another shell, felt the ground shudder beneath him. Quickly he scrambled over the parapet, then half slid, half fell down the steep side of the trench. Inside, the air was mercifully cool and damp.

The ground shook again, and a rain of fragments clattered down around him. Josef wondered how long the bombardment would continue. When it was over, he decided, he would go back to the wreck of the plane and see if he could find the pilot's gun. It might not be damaged. Then he would be able to kill the enemy, if she was still alive. Or if not, kill some more enemy somewhere else.

Josef licked his dry lips, tasted the dust there. Ingrid was dead. Blood covering their fur. The enemy sergeant standing there, aiming her gun, ready to finish the job. I'll kill all of them, thought Josef. I'll kill all of them.

Chapter 11

Slow and dirty, thought Roz.

She stared out of the window of the railway carriage at the countryside crawling past behind ragged clouds of smutty grey steam. Yes: slow and dirty. That was a pretty good way of describing all twentieth-century systems of transport; certainly all the ones she'd met so far, with the exception of the bicycle, which was just slow, and the motor car, which was just dirty. It was hard to believe that on this 'express'

train, the fastest form of transport available, it was going to take the rest of the day for the three of them to travel from Lyons to Paris, a distance of less than four hundred klicks.

When she'd asked if they could take the maglev, Martineau had

looked at her blankly and Chris had whispered that it hadn't been invented yet.

Roz was beginning to get tired of finding out that things hadn't been invented yet. She wanted to get back to a place and a time where things had been invented, where things actually worked. She wanted to be able to watch the holovids, to ride a flitter over the parkland tops of the Overcity, to sit in her slobby apartment drinking a couple of three-packs of Ice Warrior. In short, she wanted to go home.

Or, failing that (and she knew it was impossible), the TARDIS

would do. In fact, just the sight of the Doctor would make her feel better at the moment. She'd persuaded Martineau to send some men to check out the hilltop above Larochepot -

she'd told him, almost truthfully, that their employer was supposed to be meeting them there, and that he would be able to help if they found him - but the place had been deserted. No trace of a blue box, no trace of a man in a cream linen suit answering to the name of 'Doctor'.

Roz didn't like it. The Doctor could be irritating, mysterious and evasive at times, but it wasn't like him not to turn up at all. It wasn't just that something was wrong: something was very wrong. She remembered what she'd said to Chris yesterday: 'How can you be late in a time machine?' The words didn't seem even slightly funny now She watched the French countryside drifting slowly past and wondered if she would ever see anything familiar, anything of her own time, anything that moved quickly, ever again.

'Hey! This is great stuff!'

Roz turned away from the window to find out what her partner thought was so great now. He was sitting opposite her, his head bowed under the low metal luggage-rack of the second-class compartment. He was holding a bottle of black fluid in his hand, sucking gleefully through a straw. Roz read aloud the label on the bottle: '"Coca-Cola"? What's that, the local cure for acne?'

'It is the new American drink,' said Martineau, from his seat by the sliding door of the compartment. He then seemed to realize what he'd done - spoken directly to Roz - and his face froze over, waxed moustache on waxy features.

Roz groaned. It was going to be a long five hours.

Chris took the straw out of his mouth and offered the bottle to Roz. ‘Try it!’

‘Are you sure I won’t grow horns?’

‘Course not! There aren’t any morphic agents in it, it’s just -’ he began to quote from the label ‘“- a truly refreshing -”’

‘Then what are those bumps on your forehead?’

interrupted Roz.

‘Bumps?’ Chris extended a hand towards his forehead, then stopped, looking at the grin on her face. He blushed.

From the corner of her eye, Roz saw a small, tight smile appear on Martineau’s lips, and equally quickly disappear.

She felt a little bit better for that.

The carriage shuddered slightly and an embankment rose outside the window, the rapid passage of little bushes and tufts of grass on the bank giving at least an illusion of speed. The bank was quickly replaced by a wall of purple-red bricks, then by darkness. The sound of the train’s progress became louder, amplified and distorted by the hollow roar of air displaced along the walls of the tunnel. Roz wondered why they didn’t use evacuated tunnels with tuned-field shields to keep the air out. She supposed that, yet again, they hadn’t been invented yet.

As they emerged from the tunnel, the train began to slow down. High brick walls topped with grey houses drifted by.

The end of a station platform appeared: for a moment Roz thought that they’d arrived in Paris, but then she saw the name ‘Macon’ on the wooden painted signs and grimaced.

As the train pulled up, Roz idly scanned the crowd. Cheaply dressed, most of them, with tired looks on their faces. Amalie had said that the war had worn out France, worn out the world: three-quarters of Frenchmen between eighteen and thirty were dead. ‘Where will the next generation of leaders come from? And the scientists, doctors, lawyers, philosophers, craftsmen - all dead! It is a tragedy - it is worse than a tragedy, it is madness!’

Roz remembered the words of the dead woman as her eyes moved

from face to face in the crowd. Factory workers, she supposed, going home at the end of the day.

'Why aren't they getting on the train?' asked Chris suddenly.

Roz realized that it was true: none of them were moving towards the train. She shrugged. 'Perhaps they can't afford it.

Perhaps they've just come to watch.' She remembered similar crowds in the Undertown back home, staring as lines of construction flitters drifted by, off to build another Overcity, a galaxy of towers from which they would be forever excluded. Some things, she decided, didn't change.

But Martineau said: 'It is the wrong platform. They get on from the other side.' He was looking at Chris curiously: obviously, thought Roz, anyone from this time would have travelled on trains a lot, and would have known that. Now that Martineau had mentioned it, she could see that the gap between the train and the platform was far too wide to jump across and that there were no steps or boarding tubes; in fact, peering down, she could see that there was another set of tracks in the gap, where the workers' train would presumably draw up. And from the other side of their own train - beyond the sliding door of the compartment - she could hear the clattering and banging of passengers getting aboard. After a moment the wooden door to the compartment slid open, and a heavy, elderly man with a long, spade-shaped beard and curling moustaches looked in. He glanced at Roz, then at Martineau, froze for a moment as if in indecision, then nodded and withdrew.

Roz frowned. There had been something familiar about the man - about the hunted look in his eyes -

'Parmentier!' she said aloud.

Martineau stared at her, but Roz was already on her feet, heading for the door. She looked over her shoulder at Chris, said, 'In disguise. He's following us.'

'But that's impossible!' said Martineau. 'No one could be following. There is no quicker train - '

'Then he's followed us from Lyons and he's using the cover of everyone getting on board to check out the compartments. I expect he was hoping you weren't with us.'

Roz opened the door, checked up and down the corridor.

There was no sign of the man in the beard and moustaches.

‘I wonder why he’s followed us?’ asked Chris.

Roz shrugged. ‘There are two possible things he might do. He might shoot us first and asks questions afterwards, or he might ask the questions first and then shoot us.’

‘Not necessarily. He might just be a “‘tec”, like us,’ said Chris.

‘You say it’s Parmentier?’ asked Martineau. ‘The toy shop man? But he’s - ’

‘The mayor’s friend, right,’ said Roz without looking round. ‘And I’m the first cousin of the Empress of All Earth, didn’t you know?’ She stepped out into the corridor, pulled Chris with her. ‘We need to find him, Chris,’ she said. ‘You go forward, I’ll go back. Check every compartment, but don’t challenge him - just fetch me, OK?’

‘Wait a moment!’ Martineau’s voice. ‘I didn’t say you could go!’

Roz turned round, saw that the policeman was standing, his hand on the holster of his gun.

‘You’d better stay here,’ she said to him. ‘If Parmentier comes back, hold him. Long black beard, curly moustache.

Right?’ She shoved Chris in the back. ‘Go, Chris.’

Chris gave her an anxious glance, then went.

The train was pulling out of the station: Roz saw a well-dressed man running alongside it, red-faced and shouting, saw him falling behind with grey steam wreathing his body.

The corridor forward was clear, and Chris was already looking through the door of the next compartment. In the other direction an elderly woman was sitting on a pile of suitcases, engaged in an argument with a uniformed railway official. Roz pushed past them with a muttered, ‘Sorry -

places to go.’

‘Who is that?’ snapped the old woman. ‘How dare you push past me like that?’ Roz recognized the familiar tones of a born complainer,

decided to risk it and push on.

‘Here, you, darkie - come back here!’ The official’s voice.

‘Who’re you calling a darkie?’ snapped Roz, wrenching open a compartment door. She wasn’t sure what the word meant, but it was clearly an insult.

A family of five - parents, three children - stared up at her from inside the compartment. The father was stowing luggage on the rack.

‘’Scuse me,’ said Roz politely, closing the door on them.

A hand caught her arm: the official. Long supercilious nose, weak watery eyes, peaked cap. ‘What are you doing?

Where is your master?’

Roz glared at the man. ‘What master?’ She shook off his grip with a rapid movement of her arm. ‘Look, I’ve got a job to do, OK?’ ‘You should throw her off the train! Wretched African - she’s no business here!’ Behind the woman, Roz could see Martineau trotting up.

‘I told you to stay put!’ she snapped.

‘I am a member of the Police Force!’ snapped Martineau in return. ‘I give the orders, not you!’

‘What’s going on?’ asked the official feebly, addressing the policeman. ‘Who is she?’

‘She’s in my custody,’ said Martineau calmly.

‘Custody!’ shouted Roz. She couldn’t believe it. ‘I thought you said you were going to help us!’

There was a moment’s silence: Roz and Martineau glared at each other across the mountain of luggage guarded by the old woman. In the corner of Roz’s vision, the grey shapes of houses moved past the window as the train gathered speed.

The old woman said, ‘Wretched African! I don’t care whose custody she’s in, get her off the train.’ She added quietly, as if to an unseen companion, ‘They smell, you know.’

Roz transferred her gaze to the woman, met a wrinkled frown, angry blue eyes that quickly looked away. Suddenly it dawned on her: Jean-

Pierre's barely concealed dislike, increasing on each visit as she and Amalie grew closer; Martineau's refusal to speak to her; and now this woman's anger, and the official's insult, 'darkie'. And the kid in the street, jumping up and down like a monkey. Roz knew the stories of Nomgquase and Mandela, of course, of the long fight against racism, but it had never occurred to her to think about the dates of that African story and apply them to this European setting.

Now she realized she was living in that time: the time when her darker-than-average skin was the signal for prejudice, even hatred, from those of a lighter skin colour. It was absurd; it was inconceivable; but it was .happening.

For once in her life, she couldn't think of anything to say.

'If you could return to the compartment, madame,' said Martineau. His tone was polite, but his expression was smug.

'Perhaps everyone will be - '

There was the sound of a gunshot, followed by a woman's scream. Martineau broke off in mid word, whirled round and began to run towards the sound.

Without hesitation, Roz followed, leaping over the heap of luggage. Her injured leg gave a stab of pain, but she ignored it.

There was a second shot. Roz accelerated to a flat-out run, saw Chris standing in the corridor at the end of the carriage, clutching a long black object which she realized with a start was a false beard. There was a small silvery gun in his other hand. Martineau had drawn his own gun, was pointing it at Chris.

'What happened?' she yelled. A woman was screaming: Roz saw her standing there, young, her white dress spattered with blood. 'Chris, I told you not to challenge -'

Then she saw Parmentier. He was kneeling in the carriage doorway, clutching his hip, his face white with pain.

'He tried to kill me,' said Chris. He was addressing Martineau, who was covering him with the gun from a distance of about two metres. 'He shot me, but my armour stopped the bullet. I tried to get the gun away from him and it went off.'

Shit, thought Roz. Not another one. Does everyone in this era carry

these stupid weapons?

Ignoring Martineau, who was gesturing at Chris with his own gun, she went up to Parmentier and took his hand.

‘What weren’t you telling us, back at the toy shop?’ she asked.

He looked up into her eyes. ‘No - no, you don’t understand,’ he moaned.

‘What don’t I understand?’ asked Roz.

Chris, also ignoring Martineau, was getting out the medikit, kneeling down to get a scan on the wound.

Parmentier was breathing fast, and his eyes were rolling

- Roz knew he was going to lose consciousness any second.

‘What don’t I understand?’ she repeated, urgently, trying to hold his drifting eyes with hers. She glanced at the medikit scan: it showed a deep leg wound, blood loss, shock.

But Parmentier was too far gone to hear. ‘We are so close to it now,’ he said, his voice little more than a croak. ‘So close you would not believe it. You cannot prevent it now.

The whole world will be transformed -’ He swallowed. ‘I die, but long live the Bolshevik Revolution!’

The effect of these last words on Martineau was extraordinary. His eyes bulged, his face flushed with anger, and he stared at Parmentier as if the man had suddenly turned out to be an alien in disguise. He strode forward, pushing past Roz, and put his gun to Parmentier’s head.

‘In the name of the Republic of France,’ he said. ‘I place you under arrest.’

But Parmentier was beyond hearing. With a shudder, he fell sideways and dropped limp into Roz’s arms.

‘OK,’ said Roz, folding her arms and leaning back against the window. ‘Let’s start at the beginning: what’s a Bolshevik?’

She put a hand against the wooden ledge of the window, to steady herself against the motion of the train. Her leg was hurting: it had

been healing up nicely under the plastaform, but it hadn't been ready for that sudden sprint down the corridor.

Parmentier stared up at her from the floor of the compartment, where she and Chris had wrapped him in a grey blanket provided by the railway official. His grey eyes were watery and red-rimmed. He was still wearing the ridiculous false moustache: it quivered slightly as his lips trembled. But he didn't speak.

Roz glanced at Chris, who was sitting on the seat above Parmentier's head, the medikit in his hand. 'Let me help you,'

he said softly. 'Just now, you said you were a supporter of the Bolshevik Revolution. Now Monsieur Martineau has told me that the Bolsheviks aim to "overthrow the government, to destroy the rule of reasonable and decent-thinking people, and to substitute anarchy based on the rule of brute force". Is that a fair description of them?'

Parmentier did not reply, but closed his eyes as if asleep.

Martineau, standing by the door of the compartment, flicked a sour glance at Roz and snorted. 'He won't tell you anything,' he said. 'These people never do. He only said he was a revolutionary at all because he thought he was dying.'

Roz didn't bother to reply. She knew that Parmentier wouldn't say anything with a member of the gendarmerie around, but Martineau had only agreed to let them perform an interrogation at all on the condition that he be present throughout, and there wasn't much that she could do about that. She even grudgingly admitted to herself that it was understandable. She'd have felt the same if strangers demanded to interrogate a prisoner of hers, back home.

But the fact remained that Martineau was in the way.

'We're not asking you to give anyone away,' Chris was saying. 'We just want you to explain who they are. To give us your side of the story.'

Silence.

'OK,' said Roz. 'Let's try this one. Do you remember Amalie Govier? She was a regular customer of yours. She bought toys for her brother's children.'

Parmentier opened his eyes, but said nothing.

‘She’s dead,’ Roz went on sharply. ‘One of your friends shot her last night. That was just before they vanished everyone in Larochepot.’

Parmentier’s face twitched. Roz heard a small intake of breath. But still he said nothing.

‘Before we left Touleville, we spoke to Mathilde Detaze, Amalie’s cook,’ she said. ‘She found the priest dying of gunshot wounds. He said he’d seen agents of the Devil. We think he saw your friends.’

Parmentier gave a slight shrug. ‘Priests are agents of the forces of oppression,’ he said. ‘To them all revolutionary forces are evil. Still, I am sorry he died. And I am sorry about Amalie Govier. She was a pleasant woman; we often met in church.’ His face quivered.

‘So you admit you know why these people died?’

Martineau’s voice. ‘You admit you are a supporter of the Bolsheviks and the anarchists?’ Parmentier’s eyes swung up to the policeman’s face, then closed tight.

Roz swore, stared furiously at Martineau. Every time they got near to getting anything out of Parmentier the gendarme opened his big mouth and ruined it. Couldn’t he just shut it for five minutes?

Chris glanced at her, and must have read her face, because he turned quickly to the Frenchman. ‘Sir, I think we might get more information out of Monsieur Parmentier if you left.’

‘He’s my prisoner,’ said Martineau calmly, folding his arms.

Roz just went on staring at him, at the shiny brass buttons on his uniform jacket. He was a good cop, she thought. There had to be some way of convincing him.

Then she had a better idea. ‘OK, Chris, let’s chuck it in and get some coffee. We’ll leave him to Martineau.’

Chris opened his mouth to protest; she kicked him in the shin just in time. He got up, said ‘Excuse me’ politely to Martineau, who hesitated and then stood aside. Chris slid the door back, letting in the noises of the corridor and a draught of cold air that smelled of soot.

Parmentier had opened his eyes again and was looking anxiously from one to the other of them. ‘I -’ He hesitated, then looked pleadingly at Chris’s retreating back. ‘I will speak to you, Monsieur Chris, if the

other two leave.'

Roz folded her arms. 'No way. You're Monsieur Martineau's prisoner.'

'You don't dictate to us,' said Martineau at the same time.

Roz almost smiled. She liked the 'us'. It was definitely an improvement. She looked at the Frenchman and said,

'Maybe we could compromise. Just to get him to talk.'

For the first time, Martineau looked directly at her. 'In what way?'

Roz shrugged. 'You get the coffee. Chris and I have a little chat with your prisoner.' She stressed the last two words, then added, 'If he says anything material to your inquiry, we'll let you know, of course.'

Martineau's eyes narrowed. Roz held her breath.

Parmentier said, 'I will talk to Monsieur Chris only.'

Everyone ignored him.

'Very well,' said Martineau at last. 'We will try it.' He looked at his watch. 'I will give you fifteen minutes.'

There was more polite shuffling as Chris made way for Martineau to leave; when at last the sliding door was shut, Roz heaved a huge sigh of relief.

'I will talk to Monsieur Chris only.' Parmentier was sitting up now, a hand against the bulge on his hip where a plastaform was healing his wound.

'We're partners,' said Roz. 'You talk to Chris, you talk to me. OK?'

Parmentier appeared to consider this. Finally he looked up at Roz. 'You know, you should understand, after what happened to your race in America. Slavery, misery, even after the so-called emancipation. It is the same in Europe, believe me. The working people have no more rights than slaves.'

Parmentier was obviously speaking from a deep conviction. Roz remembered the factory workers standing on the platform, their poor clothes, the dull, tired expressions on their faces. Like the underdwellers, she thought: deprived, miserable, detested by everyone - and therefore easily led.

Easily picked up by criminals, druggies, political extremists.

Or aliens, pretending to be extremists so as to get a foothold inside Earth's political system.

Yes. This situation was beginning to seem familiar.

Maybe even controllable.

Parmentier was still talking: 'It is all a matter of education, you see. Of educating the children. If they are sent to capitalist schools, they learn capitalist ways, become good capitalists. But if they are made to learn the ways of socialism

-' He broke off, smiled. 'You need not worry about the people of Larochepot. They will be ransomed, no doubt, if any wish to return.'

The train entered a tunnel, plunging the compartment into the yellow half-light provided by the small lamps above the seats. The carriage swayed under the changing pressure of air: Roz's leg gave another stab of pain, and she scowled.

'Return from where?' asked Chris over the roar of the tunnel.

'Naturally I can't tell you that,' said Parmentier. 'But believe me, they are quite safe.'

'You sure of that?' asked Roz. 'The people that the priest saw weren't human.'

Parmentier stared at her, his grey eyes wide. 'Of course they were human! They might have been wearing strange uniforms, but they were human! You are trying to tell me they were devils? Or ghosts?'

'No, just aliens.'

'I don't understand.'

'People from another world,' explained Chris.

Parmentier looked from one to the other of them in bewilderment; then his face hardened. 'You are talking nonsense. That is fantasy, it is Jules Verne, it is impossible.

You are just trying to make me give something away. Well, I won't.' He lay back and closed his eyes again.

Roz nodded. Fifty years before space travel, she remembered. ‘OK, so you think it’s impossible,’ she said. ‘So what did they tell you?’

Silence.

‘About the uniforms?’ prompted Chris.

‘I’m not talking about that.’

‘OK, don’t talk about it. But think about it for a minute.

Why should these revolutionaries go around dressed up like bears?’

Parmentier’s eyes opened, flicked from Roz to Chris and back again. He licked his lips, shrugged. ‘I cannot tell you.’

The train emerged from the tunnel, and a strip of sunlight lit on the wooden panelling around the door, staining it a rosewood colour. Roz decided that they weren’t going to get any further this way. She mentally rewound the conversation, searching for a place to start again.

Chris beat her to it. ‘You talked about re-educating children as “socialists”. They’d have to be taken away for that, wouldn’t they?’

Parmentier shrugged again. ‘Maybe.’

‘But you weren’t told where?’

No reply.

Roz decided to try a different tack. ‘Look, what if I told you that I reckon your revolution has been betrayed?’

‘No! That’s not true!’

‘Have you seen where the children are going to be taken? Have they taken you through a transmat beam? Have they shown you these “socialist” schools? Do you know anyone who has seen them?’

Parmentier said slowly, ‘If I were a party to such a thing, I think I would trust my comrades. Wouldn’t you?’

‘Even if those “comrades” are two and a half metres tall with long brown fur and three fingers on each hand?’

‘They are special liaison forces! They dress like big toys.

It is intended to reassure the children.' He paused, then said, in a puzzled tone, 'What do you mean, three fingers?'

'You haven't seen them close up, have you?' asked Chris.

Parmentier stared at him.

''Cos if you had, you'd know they weren't humans in costume.'

Roz took it up. 'They've got three fingers on each hand.

They've got blank green eyes with fixed lenses. They don't even smell human. You'd know.' It occurred to Roz as she spoke that she was using just the same appeal to prejudice -

almost the same words - as the old woman in the corridor.

' *They smell, you know*.'

But there was no time to worry about that now.

Parmentier was cracking, she could tell. He was looking from her to Chris and back again, desperation on his face. Roz had seen that expression before: he wanted to know that he hadn't been taken for a sucker, that he hadn't been betrayed by his own idealism.

Big mistake, idealism, she thought. Gets you into all kinds of trouble.

Aloud, she said harshly, 'It's like I've said. You've been sold out.'

'We don't want to get involved in local politics,' Chris said gently. 'We don't need to know about the people you *think* are responsible for this. They may well be innocent. All we want is to know what's happening, so that we can stop it before it's too late. There are a lot of children involved.'

'They will not be harmed!' cried Parmentier. 'We only want to re-educate them! When they have seen for themselves the triumphs of socialism, the new science, the new society - when they have spent a few years in the hands of the Communists, then we will allow them to return - if they wish to. But many will probably want to stay.'

Roz looked at him. 'Do you really believe that, just at the moment?'

Parmentier returned her gaze. There was a long moment of silence. From the corner of her eye, Roz watched the sunlight crawl around the wall of the compartment, fade and die. At last Parmentier asked,

‘How many children?’

‘We’re not sure. Millions.’

‘Millions? But - but they said -’ He looked away. ‘You’re lying. It’s impossible.’ But he didn’t sound convinced any more.

Roz pressed home the advantage. ‘When are they going to be picked up?’

‘Tomorrow. At six in the morning. The control is in England.’ He looked at the ground. ‘The code they gave for the operation is “Recruiter”.’

Book Three

The Front Line

Chapter 12

When Benny woke up there was a gun pointing at her head.

She stared at it for a moment, at the barrel gleaming in the light of a low sun, at the crouching figure that held it, silhouetted against red-stained clouds.

‘Ace?’ she hazarded.

Then she remembered. The Recruiter. The little girl the Ogrons had killed. The other little girl, that she had refused to kill.

She started to shake again, felt the Recruiter’s strings pulling at her consciousness, telling her to kill the enemy, kill whilst she wasn’t looking, kill whilst she still thinks you’re asleep -

The figure spoke: ‘I’m not going to kill you yet, unless you try to get away. I’m holding you for questioning.’

Benny swallowed. The girl’s voice - normal, human, if somewhat wary - seemed enough to break the Recruiter’s spell. For the time being. Ah. Good,’ she said aloud. ‘Er -

what do you want to know?’

‘Why didn’t you kill me? Why did you break your rifle?’

Benny sat up, being careful not to make any sudden moves. Her body felt weak, as if she'd had a fever. Looking around, she saw that they were in a trench. Part of the wall had collapsed, presumably under the impact of a shell, and the sun and flame-coloured sky were visible through a tangle of barbed wire behind the gap. A furred arm projected from the rubble, the part-rotted flesh covered in small green and yellow flies.

'Answer me!' snapped Gabrielle suddenly, jerking at the gun. Benny looked into her eyes, saw hopeless confusion.

But she also knew that the girl could kill. She remembered how she herself had felt as Sergeant Summerfield leading the attack on the enemy, and

shuddered.

'I'm a pacifist,' she said quietly.

The girl looked at the ground for an instant: Benny could have tackled her, but decided not to risk it. When she looked up again, she said, 'That isn't a word.'

'Yes it is. It means someone who doesn't want war.

Someone who doesn't believe in killing people, unless it's the only way of saving your own life.' She paused. 'Maybe not even then.'

The girl frowned and began drawing patterns in the loose soil with her foot. Benny saw that her grey flying leathers were coated in cracked mud, and that her face was white with exhaustion. She realized that the girl must have dragged her here, out of no man's land.

'You believe in it too,' she said aloud. 'Or you wouldn't have brought me all this way. Not just to ask a few questions.'

The girl just looked at her. There was something almost like hope in her eyes.

'What's your name?' asked Benny softly.

There was a long pause. Then: 'Gabrielle. And your name's Professor. Professor Benny. You said so.'

Benny grinned. 'Just Benny will do.'

A tiny smile in response. But the girl didn't lower the gun.

She just stared at it for a while, then said, ‘If I don’t kill you, I’ll be a traitor. But I don’t want to kill you.’ She looked back up at Benny then, as if for help.

‘I don’t want you to kill me either.’ Benny grinned again, but it was forced this time, and her hands were shaking.

Evidently just making friends with someone wasn’t enough.

Not here.

‘The only reason I can think of for not killing you,’ said Gabrielle carefully, ‘is if you were to help me in something useful to the war effort.’ She paused. ‘But now that you’ve answered my questions, I can’t think of anything else.’ Again she looked at Benny as if for help.

Benny looked away, at the dead arm sticking out of the rubble. She said, ‘Why can’t we just both be pacifists?’

Gabrielle shook her head. ‘It’s best not to - best not to -’

Abruptly she began to cry.

Benny took the risk, leaned forward and put her arms around the small, shaking body. ‘I know,’ she said quietly,

‘believe me, I know.’

She held the child for several minutes, rocking her gently. But she knew better than to try and take away the gun.

Eventually Gabrielle stepped back, rubbed her nose and eyes, and said, ‘I’m hungry. We should get back to my unit, where I can get some food.’ She paused. ‘This part of the front is quiet, but if we go south, we should be able to reach some friendly artillery.’

‘They won’t be friendly to me,’ Benny pointed out.

‘That’s all right; I’ll tell them you’re my prisoner.’

Benny thought about the concept ‘prisoner’, and what it would have meant to Sergeant Summerfield. She shook her head. ‘They’ll kill me, Gabrielle.’

Gabrielle nodded. ‘But at least I won’t have to do it.’

Benny shook her head gently. ‘That won’t make any difference to me,

will it?'

'To you?' The girl seemed bewildered. 'No, I suppose not. But I can't think of anything else to do.'

Benny desperately tried to think of somewhere else they could go. Now that she thought about it, she was hungry too.

She took out the leather water bottle from her uniform, drank a little, then offered it to Gabrielle, who took it and drank greedily, almost emptying the bottle.

'We could go north -' she began. But what was to the north? Benny realized that she didn't know. Sergeant Surnmerfield hadn't had that information. She was vaguely aware of the fact that there were reinforcements to the south, that in the event of an emergency she could retreat in that direction. But the north -? You just didn't go that way.

'I'm not sure what happens to the north,' Gabrielle was saying. 'I was at the limit of my patrol when -' She broke off, grimaced. 'Anyway, my unit's to the south of here. I have to go back.' She paused. 'I could - I could just leave you. If you promised not - I mean, if you're really that word you said and won't kill anyone.'

Benny stood up, decided that the time had come to take another risk. 'I'm definitely going north,' she said. 'Are you coming with me?' She started to walk, crawlingly aware of the gun that must be pointed at her back.

After a few moments she heard the sound of footsteps running after her, of rapid childish breathing. Slowly, they caught her up.

'I've changed my mind,' said Gabrielle's voice. 'If you're going to walk around on your own, then I think you ought to have a guard with you, to make sure you don't sabotage anything. So I'm assigning myself to you.'

It was all that Benny could do not to laugh. Instead she said, 'Sounds like a good idea to me.' She turned round, saw Gabrielle still determinedly holding the gun.

She looked at it, raised her eyebrows.

'You promise you won't try to get away?' asked Gabrielle.

‘I promise,’ said Benny solemnly. She reached out: after a moment, a small gloved hand, covered in pieces of dry mud, reached out in return. Benny grabbed it, squeezed gently, grinned.

‘Come on, Dorothy,’ she said, ‘we’re off to see the Wizard - or better still, the Doctor.’ She paused, then muttered under her breath, ‘Assuming what I did to him hasn’t killed him off, that is.’

Neither Benny nor Gabrielle noticed a small, intent figure following them along the floor of the trench. He kept to the shadows, stopped when they stopped, walked only when they walked. A canteen of water stolen from a corpse hung around his neck. The boy’s pale face was filled with anger and confusion. Occasionally he took a swig of murky water from the canteen, or glanced at the empty gun in his hand.

I’ll kill them all, thought Josef. I’ll kill them all. As soon as I get the chance.

Chris looked at the timetables spread out in front of him, squinting in the poor light of the police station waiting-room.

Roz decided that he had probably looked rather like this when he’d been a kid, unpacking the assembly instructions on his model spaceships. Coldweld slot A to tab B -

‘If we get the 6.55 boat train from Paris to London,’ said Chris at last, ‘we should be in London by - ‘ he paused, ran his finger down the column of figures to make sure he’d got it right - 11.57. That means we can get the last train from London at 0.10 which gets into Bristol at 4.35.’

‘You’ll never cross London in ten minutes,’ said Martineau. Roz almost grinned. There’d had to be a catch somewhere.

‘Cross London?’ Chris looked at the Frenchman in bewilderment. ‘Why do we need to do that?’

‘I have been there. The Paris boat train goes to Victoria Station. Trains to Bristol go from Paddington. They are - ’ he shrugged - a considerable distance apart. It would take half an hour, maybe more.’

Roz looked from one to the other of them and scowled.

‘This sounds more like a kid’s puzzle than a transport system.

Join the dots and you might get somewhere, eventually. We need to be in that factory in Bristol before six o'clock.'

Martineau glowered at her. 'So you say.'

'You heard what Parmentier said.'

'He didn't say it to me. And anyway, there's no need for you to go there. We have telegraphed the English police, and

-'

'It's our only chance!' snapped Roz.

Martineau glared at her for a moment, then went on quietly, - anyway, it will be too late by the time you arrive.

Besides, I have no authority to allow you to leave France.'

Roz noticed the way that Martineau had phrased that last statement, the slight inflection on the word 'allow'. She glanced at him slyly. 'And no authority to prevent it either?'

'I have no instructions about that.' He paused, suddenly seemed to take a great interest in his polished boots. But

- I suppose - if you are really determined to travel to this place in England tonight, I know someone who might be able to help.'

Roz just looked at him.

'There is a war comrade of mine, a Lieutenant Emile Chevillon. He transferred to the Flying Corps in 1917, and he has a civilian licence now. He owns an aeroplane.'

'What's an aeroplane?' asked Chris.

Manda's hands were sore, the skin red and itchy. Her arms and chest ached from the exertion, and one of her knees had developed a distinct, painful crick. This was the fifth room she'd scrubbed clean: in each one the Doctor had insisted she make a thorough job of it, scrubbing not just the floor but the walls, the tables and chairs, the frames of the bunks, even the light fittings. All the while the Doctor had stood around, the silver drill in one hand, his hat sometimes in the other. Occasionally he'd spoken, usually to himself as far as Manda could tell, disjointed phrases that didn't make much sense: 'If the transdimensional analyser is manually operated

- ‘Optical circuitry indicates a phase three disphase-matter unit, but - Not likely to be a hypermotogenerotropo-morphic system’ - this last whilst examining the door handle through a magnifying glass that he’d produced from one of his pockets.

These ramblings were interrupted by barked orders:

‘Sutton! You’ve missed that speck of dust in the corner!’, or ‘I can still see that stain quite clearly - clean it again!’ The orders were sometimes, but not always, accompanied by an apologetic smile, and a gesture towards the door of whatever room they were in. The doors were guarded, usually on the outside, but once, terrifyingly, on the inside, by the bearlike things, or even worse, by other hairy things, ape-faced and long-toothed, whose bodies smelled like rotten meat.

In this, the fifth, room, the Doctor was tapping on the walls with his knuckles, listening to the sounds and nodding meaningfully. At least, Manda supposed the nods were meaningful, until he suddenly said, ‘Has it ever occurred to you how fascinating resonance patterns can be?’

Manda looked up from the bunk she was

scrubbing.‘What are resonance patterns?’

The Doctor put a finger to his lips, went to the door and knocked on that. When nothing happened, he nodded, smiled, knocked again, much louder this time.

Still nothing.

‘The structure brought about by the interaction of wave-propagated energy with matter or other waves whose frequency is equal to or an exact multiple or exact fractional multiple of the frequency of the original waves.’

Manda blinked. ‘I beg your pardon?’

The Doctor ignored her, crouched down and began rapping on the floor. ‘In this case, matter *and* other waves,’

he said obscurely. He repeated the rapping, this time with one ear against the floorboards. His hat fell off.

‘Can I have a rest now?’ said Manda hopefully, glancing at the door.

The Doctor once more ignored her, so she sat down on the bunk and closed her eyes.

'Hmm,' said the Doctor after a while. 'Manda, could you scream, or something?'

Manda opened her eyes and stared at him. The Doctor grinned at her, and tapped the drill, which began making its characteristic high-pitched whine. She realized then what he meant: there was only one legitimate reason for doing any drilling here, and that was -

She swallowed, then said loudly, 'No - Doctor no, Please

-

The Doctor grinned encouragement, nodded briskly.

Manda screamed, and screamed again, and went on screaming.

The Doctor put the drill bit to the floor and began cutting into it, making a series of holes in the floorboard. He put his eye to each of the holes, nodding thoughtfully from time to time. Once, he stood up and went to the door, removed the doorhandle with a v-shaped tool he produced from one of his pockets, then tore out what looked like a bundle of white silk threads which he proceeded to play cat's cradle with for a few moments before rolling them up again and feeding them through one of the holes. Then he went on drilling.

Manda kept screaming, from time to time jumping up and down on the floor to add emphasis. She remembered Celia Parsons in the school dramatic society, making a similar display when playing Queen Dido of Carthage, though she hadn't had to do it for so long. Every time she so much as paused for breath the Doctor would give her an impatient glance or gesture. After five minutes Manda's throat was beginning to ache, and her screams had become decidedly hoarse.

Finally the Doctor held up a hand, said loudly, 'Shh!'

Then he beckoned, pointed to the latest hole, whispered,

'The Recruiter.'

Manda put her eye to the hole, saw a white blob. After a couple of seconds her eye focused on the view, and Manda saw that a shiny metallic curve, like part of a mirror or a silver teapot, crossed the white surface. A thin line of bright colours divided the silver from the

white: the colours moved to and fro, reds and ambers and purples and greens. She looked through one of the other holes: it was drilled at a different angle, and gave her a view of a pulsing fabric made of thin lines of colour, the colours bright and constantly changing.

'What is it?' she whispered, awestruck.

'The bit you're looking at is the reader end of a mm'x synchronisis intradimensional energizer,' he murmured.

'Unfortunately, it's being gravely misused.'

Manda watched the shifting colours, realized that she could watch them for hours. 'Did it bring me here?' she asked at last.

'Yes and no,' said the Doctor. 'It brought you, but the instructions - ' The lights flickered. limm, I'd better have another look through there.'

Reluctantly, Manda tore herself away from the view, stood up. She became aware that her legs and arms were aching.

The Doctor put his eye to the spyhole: almost at once Manda heard footsteps outside the room, followed by a knock at the door.

'Doctor!' she whispered. But the Doctor, unperturbed, kept his eye to the hole in the floorboards.

The door opened, and one of the ape-faced things came in, filling the air with its rotten meat stench.

'Doctor!' hissed Manda again. The creature glanced at her and its yellow eyes flashed: Manda felt her body begin to tremble.

At last, the Doctor looked up. Ah, Private Jurrgh! I'm glad you've popped in. I've just finished the final retraining of Private Sutton here, and look what I've found!' He gestured at the floor. 'Something - or someone - has drilled a hole right through to the next level. Go on, take a look.'

The ugly creature screwed up its face and bared its fangs. Manda felt her breathing quicken: she looked at the open door behind the thing's back, wondered if she could get round the creature and out before it grabbed her.

But the Doctor seemed unalarmed. 'Just here,' he said to the creature, pointing at the holes he'd made, using a furled umbrella that Manda

was sure he hadn't been holding a moment before. Private Jurrgh crouched down, put his eyes to the holes in the floor. There was a flash of movement and a dull thud: Manda thought she saw the silver drill, butt first, connect with the back of the animal's skull. The beast slumped sideways with a groan.

The Doctor produced a small green ball from his Pocket; it looked rather like a lime flavoured bonbon. As Manda watched in amazement, he pushed open the creature's lips and dropped the 'sweet' on its tongue.

'... and call me in the morning,' muttered the Doctor.

Then he looked up. 'Come on, Manda. We've got work to do.'

Manda followed him out of the room and along the corridor outside. She wondered what the Doctor meant by

'work'; whatever it was, she hoped it didn't involve either scrubbing anything or screaming.

'What do you want me to do?' she asked as they hurried along. She noticed that the corridor lights were rapidly fading.

'Just follow me,' said the Doctor.

Manda bit her lip. 'This is leading somewhere, isn't it?'

she asked. 'I mean, we are going to be able to go home?'

'Home?' asked the Doctor, in a tone of voice that made Manda's heart stop in her chest for a moment. It was as if he barely recognized the word, didn't understand that such a thing as 'home' existed. But then he added, 'Yes, I should think so. If I got the parameters right. And all the others too.'

By now it was almost completely dark in the corridor.

Abruptly the Doctor stopped walking and tilted his head on one side. Manda saw a light ahead: a bright, white light, silvering the bricks on the sides of the corridor ahead of them.

'Shh!' said the Doctor, pressing himself flat against the wall. Manda followed suit. The bricks were cold and wet.

'Listen!' whispered the Doctor.

Manda listened, heard nothing except her own breathing and the thudding of her heart. Then she heard footsteps, and saw three of the bearlike creatures that the Doctor had told her were called Biune blocking the corridor, rifles in their hands; behind them, a fourth held a hurricane lamp which threw the others into silhouette.

'Stop or we shoot!' growled one of them.

'We have stopped,' observed the Doctor. 'We stopped as soon as we saw your light. And we have no desire to be shot, I can assure you.'

'He's not assigned,' said one of the Biune. 'He must be the one.'

The Doctor doffed his hat. 'I'm the Doctor and this is my friend Manda.'

There was a pause. 'What is your assignment?'

'I'm afraid I haven't got one. Perhaps I mislaid it.' The Doctor began feeling around in his pockets in the dim light of the lamp. He produced several pieces of paper, one of which Manda recognized as a Great Western railway ticket. Most of the others were strange shapes and colours. Finally the Doctor proffered a triangle of green paper with the words GREATER MANCHESTER TRAFFIC AUTHORITY -

ROADSIDE PARKING PERMIT written on it. 'Will this do?' he asked.

The Biune didn't even look at the piece of paper. 'Come with us,' he said. 'If the Recruiter has a use for you in the present situation, it may let you live for a while.'

Benny was looking at the stars.

There were a lot of them, and they were very bright, but none of the constellations were recognizable: she was sure that, wherever she was now, it wasn't a planet she'd visited before. Well, not one where she'd got a chance to look at the night sky whilst sober, anyway.

'What are you looking at?'

Gabrielle's voice: the little girl was sitting on a fallen slab of bricks, hugging her knees. Starlight made her body indistinct, her face a shadowless blob. She'd at long last put the gun away, accepting Benny's promise that she wouldn't make a run for it.

'The stars,' she explained to Gabrielle. After a moment she added,

‘They’ve turned round.’

‘Turned round?’

Benny shrugged. ‘Well, we have. We’re not headed north any more, more sort of -’ she glanced up at the sky again, twisted her head back and forth a few times to work out the angle - south-east. The trench must be curving.’

The words had a dramatic effect on Gabrielle. She jumped up, drew her gun. ‘That means we’re behind enemy lines!’ She looked around, as if expecting the enemy to spring out and ambush her. Benny had been worried about that a few times herself, but they’d met no one. And this stretch of the trench was crumbling, duckboards rotten, earth dried up.

It had clearly been abandoned for some time.

‘It’s all right, Gabrielle,’ said Benny tiredly. ‘We can’t be behind any lines. We’ve been in the same trench all along, haven’t we?’

Gabrielle nodded, but didn’t put her gun away. ‘If the enemy catch me, they’ll kill me.’

‘I didn’t kill you,’ Benny pointed out. But as she spoke she had a sudden, sharp memory of what Iggh and Urggh had done to the little girl in the ground-engine. So when Gabrielle said, ‘You’re different,’ Benny just nodded morosely. She didn’t fancy Gabrielle’s chances if they met any Ogrons in red and yellow uniforms.

Then she thought of something.

‘Gabrielle,’ she asked, ‘what did you call the enemy?’

‘Call them?’ asked Gabrielle. She was still standing, her head jerking around, checking for targets. ‘They’re the enemy.’

‘And your own side?’

‘Friendly. Mustn’t fire on them. Always right.’ The words came automatically, with a metronome rhythm that Benny recognized all too well, from the inside of her own skull.

Best not to think about it.

But if they didn’t even have names -

‘No names, no pack drill,’ she muttered.

No nothing, in fact. No manufacturing capacity, no hospitals, no command structure above the level of sergeant

- although there’d been a Lieutenant Sutton when she was working for the Recruiter - hadn’t there? Her memories of that period were alarmingly hazy.

Benny frowned. She needed more time, she realized.

Time to locate the gaps in her own knowledge more closely.

Time to work out where the Doctor might be, what she could do to help him. The best thing would be to keep walking - she could think whilst they walked.

But where would they end up? With a shock, Benny realized that Gabrielle was right. If the trench was curving slowly round, then they would soon be travelling south. They would have walked around the end of no man’s land, and would be in the trench where her own unit had been stationed, or one running closely parallel. Which meant -

Which meant that the trenches were the same on both sides. *The same trench* was on both sides. Which was no way to run a war - in fact it was crazy, and only made sense if some third party wanted access to both sides.

A third party like the Recruiter.

Benny swore under her breath. The Recruiter wasn’t working for one side, commanding and controlling. It was working for both sides. It was obvious.

‘But if it was so obvious, why didn’t I realize it straight away when I broke the Recruiter’s conditioning?’ she muttered aloud. For that matter, why didn’t I think about where we were going until now?’ She was aware that she still wanted to do it: walk on along the trench, taking Gabrielle with her, until she met up with her own unit -

‘ *They’re not my unit!* ’ She felt beads of sweat form on her forehead as she tried to fight the compulsion. Obviously it wasn’t as easy as it had seemed: deep-level hypnosis was involved, and probably there was a physical component too.

She would have to keep fighting it, or she would betray Gabrielle and

the Doctor - and herself.

She became aware that Gabrielle was staring at her, gun levelled. She stared back at the girl, said quietly, 'I'm trying not to betray you. Don't make it difficult for me.'

'I think we should go back,' said Gabrielle.

Benny thought about it for a moment. Every instinct screamed, no, go on, join up with your unit and hand the prisoner over -

She remembered the blood jetting from the dying girl's arm, the hollow snap of her neck breaking. Her body began to shake.

'Compromise?' she said, her voice unsteady. 'We get out of the trench and go north?'

No, screamed her inner voice. Not that way. It's impossible. It's dangerous. It's forbidden.

'It's forbidden,' said Gabrielle aloud. 'It's impossible. It's dangerous.' Benny could hear the metronome ticking, the same rhythm in her skull and the girl's anxious voice.

Nothing's forbidden,' she said. She stood up and started towards a place where the side of the trench had caved in, forming a rough slope of broken earth and stones leading to the surface.

'I can't let you!' Gabrielle's voice was shaking too. 'I'll have to shoot you!'

Benny kept on walking, steadily.

'Please!'

Benny had reached the bottom of the slope. She turned, started to climb, concentrating on finding hand- and footholds in the loose material. But her legs were shaking, and she slipped and fell on one knee.

'Please, Benny!'

Benny started to get up, heard the click of a safety catch.

But the sound hadn't come from the trench: it had come from ahead of her. She looked up, saw a rifle barrel gleaming in the bright starlight, held in the white hands of a skeleton dressed in the remains of a pale-

coloured uniform.

Benny swallowed. Walking skeletons were the last thing she needed at the moment. Especially walking skeletons with rifles.

There was a soft, rattling footfall, and a second skeleton appeared by the side of the first, dark-boned, also carrying a rifle. Benny looked around, saw that the sides of the trench were lined with them, some pale, some dark. A few wore helmets loosely on their bare skulls. Gabrielle was staring, open-mouthed.

'We're dead!' she said. 'We are in Hell!' She fired, a single shot: Benny somehow wasn't surprised to see the gun jolt out of her hand immediately afterwards. Gabrielle gave a cry of pain, clutched at her wrist.

But Benny had seen the flash of a rifle, knew that the gun had been knocked aside by a bullet, not by supernatural means. She looked more closely at the 'skeletons', saw large compound eyes in the 'skulls', the gleam of chitin under the tattered uniforms.

'Who are you?' she asked.

'We are the True People,' said a soft voice, full of clicking and whistling noises. 'We are neutral in the war.'

Benny felt her shoulders relax. She could almost have hugged the skeletal form. 'We're neutral too,' she said, 'in a manner of speaking.' She extended a hand. 'I'm Benny.'

The skull-like head tilted to one side. No,' said the soft voice after a moment. 'You aren't neutral. You're an animal.

You're fresh meat.'

' *What?* Look, I've had a long day - ' Benny broke off as she became aware that two more of the skeletal figures were behind her, carrying Gabrielle between them. They were holding an arm each. She remembered Urggh and Iggh, and suddenly felt rather sick. 'I think you're mistaken,' she said. 'I mean, I think we could help each other.'

Again the head tilted to one side. No, you're fresh meat,'

insisted the skeleton. 'We'll take you to the food depot at the Citadel.'

Chapter 13

It was the same prison cell. Manda was sure of it: the same red-brick walls, the same dull globe of light set into the high ceiling. That alone was enough to raise a sick feeling of panic in her stomach.

She glanced at the prone form of the Doctor. ‘Shouldn’t we be trying to get away, or something?’

The Doctor slowly raised his knees to the level of his chest, held them there with his arms and began rocking back and forth. ‘I think they’ll come to us, in time.’

As he spoke, the light in the ceiling flickered and went out again. Manda shivered, though it wasn’t cold. ‘What did you do to the Recruiter?’ she asked.

The faint sound of the Doctor’s body rocking back and forth continued in the darkness for a while. Then he said, ‘I was trying to reprogram it. Or at least, a part of it.’

Manda frowned. ‘What’s "reprogram"?’

‘Something you do to a certain type of machine to make it do what you want it to do, instead of whatever it was doing in the first place. Unfortunately in this case the operation didn’t work.’ He paused. ‘Actually it usually doesn’t work, but there you are.’

The light came back on again: Manda heard footsteps outside, followed by shouts. The Doctor sprang up and leaped towards the door. He stood there for perhaps half a minute, with his ear against the metal, then frowned, sprang back, and stepped quickly across the cell to Manda.

He grabbed her arm, put his face close to hers. ‘It’s your brother, but don’t show him that you recognize him!’ he whispered urgently. Manda opened her mouth to object, to question why, to question how it could be Charles, but the Doctor only repeated, ‘Just don’t say anything! It could be-’

He broke off as the door swung open. Manda saw a man in a uniform standing there. His uniform was spattered with blood, as was his face. There was a revolver in his hand.

Manda had stared at him for a full five seconds before she realized that beneath the blood and the dirt and the uniform was indeed her

brother Charles.

She opened her mouth to call his name, but the Doctor squeezed her arm, hard enough to hurt. *Don't show him that you recognize him.*

'Sergeant-Doctor' began Charles.

'I'm afraid not,' said the Doctor. 'The uniform is borrowed.

As is Manda's.'

'Borrowed?' Charles rubbed his forehead, looked at the blood and grime on his hand. 'Why are you here? Why did you attempt to destroy the Recruiter?'

'We're trying to end the war.'

Charles rubbed his forehead again. 'End -? You can end a battle. How can you end a war? War is a permanent condition.' He looked around the cell, stared at Manda. She stared back, desperately wanting to speak, but afraid to say anything. Finally Charles said, 'You'll have to come with me.

The Recruiter wants to see you. It wants an explanation.'

The Doctor smiled and doffed his hat. 'I'll be very pleased to give one,' he said. 'And I'll be very pleased to meet the Recruiter.'

They were marching through the streets of a dead city.

It had been dead a long time, Benny decided. The buildings were not so much ruined, as eroded. Mounds of vegetation, damp with morning dew, half-concealed the lines of brickwork underneath them. Wind-sculpted outcrops of grey rock, examined closely, showed the marks of earlier, less random, sculptors, faces which might have been insectoid or human, Biune or Ogron, the details sanded away by time.

The city had been constructed on a triumphal scale: a viaduct ran for kilometres, slowly fading into the grey dawn mist; something that might have been a stadium, its walls reduced to a circle of irregular hummocks decorated with purple-leaved creepers, would once have held hundreds of thousands; a branching structure of high walls made of glinting black obsidian covered an area as large as the average spaceport. The walls were full of holes, but they were too round and regular to be the work of random erosion.

Benny turned to one of her skeletal captors. ‘What are those?’ she asked, pointing.

‘Walls with holes,’ said the insectoid. ‘They provide good cover for defenders.’

‘Yes, I can see that. But what were they before?’

‘Before what?’

‘Before the war started?’

‘How can a war start?’

Benny stared at the pale, bony face of her captor, the bulging forehead and the bulbous cherry-coloured eyes. She suddenly became aware of how tired she was, how thirsty, how much her legs ached. ‘The war must have started some time,’ she said carefully. ‘It can’t have gone on for ever.’

Her captor tilted his head to one side, apparently considering this complex remark. Finally it said, ‘The period of time is fourteen hundred years.’

Benny swallowed. She wondered how long a local year was: the usual range for habitable planets was between six months and three years, Earth time. But at the minimum estimate it was far too long, impossibly long for any war of this type to continue, even with an endless supply of recruits.

Yet the time period the alien had given agreed with the evidence provided by the state of the city: it looked as if it had been ruined for several centuries at least.

‘Why doesn’t the war end?’ she asked at last.

‘It will end when one side is totally destroyed. Then we, the True People, will supervise the victory arrangements.’

Benny frowned. The answer wasn’t really a reply to her question. But it was interesting.

‘What victory arrangements?’ she asked.

‘The departure of the Recruiter.’

‘So when the Recruiter departs, the war will end?’

Again the insectoid tilted its head on one side. ‘No,’ it said after a while. ‘When the war ends, the Recruiter will be able to depart. The means to end the war will be the means for the Recruiter to depart.’

‘What means?’

‘The successful weapon.’

‘What successful weapon?’

‘The weapon that is defined by the Recruiter as being successful.’

Benny shook her head slowly. This conversation was making less and less sense as it went on. It reminded her of something, but she couldn’t think what. If she could have a drink - preferably something with at least thirty per cent alcohol - she’d probably be able to work it out. But as it was, all she wanted to do was sit down and go to sleep.

She glanced over her shoulder, saw Gabrielle trotting along, cradling her injured hand, her brown eyes watching the landscape carefully. Perhaps she was hoping to escape.

Having seen the way their captors handled the primitive rifles they carried, Benny didn’t fancy her chances.

Ahead, a hill-sized mound appeared out of the mist.

Shadowy objects that might have been giant guns projected from the top of it. In front of it were two large buildings on stilts, with smoking chimneys. As she got close to them, Benny realized with a shock that they weren’t buildings, but machines: two mammoth ground-engines, six-legged, each with a gun turret mounted on top of the boiler.

The guns were both pointing directly at her.

She stopped dead in the middle of the track. One of her captors prodded her in the back with a rifle. ‘You won’t be attacked. The machines are ours: they protect the Recruiter.’

Benny watched the guns on the ground-engines swivel to follow her as she walked between them. Steam hissed from the top of the huge legs. She stared at them, muttered,

‘Wouldn’t take many of those to finish the war.’

Then the sense of what the insectoid had said came through to her. ‘The machines are yours, and they guard the Recruiter?’ she asked. ‘So

you work for the Recruiter?'

'No,' said the insectoid instantly. 'We are the Q'ell. We are the True People. The Recruiter works for us.'

'This is fantastic!' yelled Chris, for at least the fourteenth time since the beginning of the flight. He leaned over the side again, looked at the ground below, the moonlit fields broken by pools of silver mist, the lights of the city glittering ahead. 'I can't believe it!' He leaned forward, yelled into Roz's ear.

'This is much better than a flitter! You can sense the motion -

the open air - '

'The freezing cold!' Roz yelled back. 'The stink of petrol!'

Chris frowned at her, and pulled at the strap of the flying helmet that the pilot had given him, which was a little too tight. He looked over the side of the plane again, then up at Martineau's friend Emile Chevillon in the cockpit, perhaps three metres forward and above them, below the upper wing.

The 'passenger compartment' was nothing more than the old gunner's nest on the plane, with the gun removed to make way for the extra seat. Roz in fact had the better position, facing backwards, protected from the worst of the slipstream by the bulk of the fuselage.

'Don't you think it's exhilarating?' he shouted. 'I feel -'

He broke off as Roz jumped forward against her straps, pointed over the side. 'What the hell's that?'

Chris looked down, but couldn't see what she was pointing at.

'Another plane! It just appeared out of thin air!' She took hold of the cord that Chevillon had told them to pull in an emergency. Looking up, Chris saw the pilot look over his shoulder at them, then sharply up in the direction that Roz had been pointing.

The plane tilted to one side, giving Chris a dizzying view of the landscape below, and of the other plane, uncomfortably close. A machine-gun mounted on its wing flickered briefly. There was a series of metallic thuds, and Chris saw a line of dark holes appear on the sloping metal of the fuselage between the passenger compartment at the cockpit.

The last two holes were in Chevillon's back.

Chris heard a muffled scream of pain. The plane lurched even further to the side, and the dark bulk of the other plane passed overhead, no more than fifty metres away. Chris looked frantically round for a weapon - any weapon - but there was nothing.

Then the plane was gone. Chevillon, incredibly, was still struggling with the controls, or appeared to be: the plane swung back into an approximation of level flight.

There was a rainbow flash ahead, like coloured lightning, and another biplane appeared, the propeller facing them, the machine-gun sparking to life even as Chris instinctively tried to dodge aside.

Bullets whistled past his ears, then their own plane began to climb and the enemy disappeared below. Chris looked up at Chevillon, saw him hunched forward with blood trickling from his back.

'Chevillon's hurt,' he yelled at Roz. 'If he loses consciousness we'll crash.'

Roz stared at him for a moment, then began unbuckling her straps.

'What ?' began Chris. Then he realized, and pushed her back. 'Let me do it. I flew something like this once.' Not much like this, he thought. A Zlifon box-kite, solar-powered, slow and lazy. But it had at least had a propeller.

Before Roz could argue, Chris had unstrapped himself and was climbing over her seat, scrabbling to find purchase in the bullet-holes in the sloping fuselage.

The plane rolled to one side; Chris slid across the smooth metal and almost fell. He wrapped one arm around a wing strut and at the same instant felt Roz's hands clamp around his ankles. He found himself looking down at the lights of the city, now directly below. He could see one of the enemy planes, wings pale in the moonlight, climbing towards them. Fighting against the buffeting wind and the slow heaving of the plane, Chris hauled himself across the fuselage and grabbed two of the wing struts. Ahead, Chevillon was hunched forward over the controls, the top of his head resting against the frame of the cockpit, his face looking down.

'Let me go!' he shouted back at Roz.

But Roz didn't hear him, and didn't let go: Chris struggled, kicked, at last felt her hands release his ankles.

Quickly he hauled himself into the cockpit, cramming his body alongside Chevillon's. The wooden frame dug into his back.

Chevillon was still gripping the stick, his hands shaking.

He put his mouth close to Chris's ear, said, 'Climb! Climb!'

Then he broke into a fit of coughing. Chris could see blood dribbling from his mouth. Helplessly, he patted the man's shoulder, then took a grip on the stick, placing his own hand over Chevillon's. He noticed that Chevillon's free hand was loosely gripping a gun; he touched the gun, glanced at the man, who nodded weakly, then sagged against the side of the cockpit.

Chris took the gun and quickly put it away in an inner pocket, then turned his attention to the controls. The nose of the plane was already pointing upwards: they had been climbing for some time. He peered over the side and saw the two other planes, more than a thousand metres below and visibly receding. Either they'd given up or - more likely - they simply couldn't climb as fast as this plane. He saw now why the pilot had told him to climb.

'How are we going to land?' he shouted at Chevillon.

There was no response. Chris looked at the man's head, hanging slackly over the side, at the same moment felt Chevillon's grip on the stick loosen. Chris's stomach churned as the plane began to drop.

He tried to get a proper grip on the stick, but ChevilIon's hands were in the way. He pushed them away and felt the pilot's body flop back in its straps. With a sick feeling, Chris realized that Chevillon was probably dead.

The plane was still dropping, and was now beginning to roll. Desperately Chris pushed Chevillon's feet aside from the floor pedals, tried to put his own in their place. There wasn't room. The plane began to tip to one side.

Chris gripped the stick hard, pulled back, felt the nose rise.

The plane continued to fall. The cockpit was swaying from side to side. Chris tried again for the foot pedals, pushed at one, then the other.

The swaying of the cockpit increased. With startling suddenness, the white shape of one of the enemy planes appeared in front of him. He saw the flash of the gun firing, but the bullets went wide.

He remembered Chevillon's last words: 'Climb!'

He had to get up some forward speed, he realized, to give the wings lift. No antigravs here. He pulled at what he hoped was the throttle cable, but it wouldn't move any further.

The engine was already working as hard as it could.

OK. The only other way to gain speed was -

He shoved the stick forward, felt the nose drop.

Chevillon's body flopped forward, letting Chris fall sideways.

He caught one of the rudder pedals with his foot, felt the plane lurch. Air buffeted his face. He thought he heard Roz shouting something, but he wasn't sure.

The cockpit rail cracked, splitting into two parts centimetres from his hand. Two holes had appeared in the dashboard, one on either side.

Bullets. From behind.

Chris pulled back on the stick, hoping he'd gained enough speed. The nose rose, his stomach was pulled down.

His hand slipped on the rail, caught on the broken piece. He winced as the sharp wood cut his palm. He could see another bullet-hole now in the engine cowling. He could only hope that nothing inside had been damaged. He scanned the dashboard for diagnostics, saw nothing except a crude altimeter. It showed 2500 metres. As he watched, the needle nudged up a notch.

'We're going to make it,' he said aloud.

Then he wondered where they were going to make it to.

He could hardly keep climbing until they reached orbit.

There was no way down, unarmed, past the two planes. And anyway, he wasn't sure he could land this thing.

Sooner or later, the plane would run out of fuel, and that would be

that. It occurred to him to look at his watch: it was 5.45 a.m. The kids were due to be taken at six. He realized that, even if they could get down in one piece, there was no way they were going to make it to the factory on time.

He stared ahead, keeping his grip on the stick, knowing that for the time being he had no choice. The air was steadily getting colder.

Josef crouched down behind the wall and watched as the insect-things took the enemy sergeant and the pilot into the building. Should he try to follow them?

One glance at the ground-engines answered that question. He could see the turret guns slowly turning back to cover the ground between him and the doorway of the building. As he watched, the doors swung shut: for some reason they made no sound as they closed.

Slowly, Josef let himself sit down. There didn't seem to be anything else he could do. Ingrid was gone. Because he hadn't had a weapon, and because of the insect-things, he had failed to kill the enemy and avenge her. He didn't know how to get back to his unit: it was probably further than he could walk. His feet were painful. It occurred to him that he ought to do something about them, but he didn't know what.

Ingrid would have known, but Ingrid was dead.

He curled up on the dry soil and began to cry.

Manda hadn't been walking for long, but it felt like hours.

Charles led the way. Two Biune followed them, each carrying a rifle. From time to time Manda felt the cold snout of a rifle touch the back of her neck. Her legs had started to shake, until she could scarcely walk; she only kept going by virtue of the Doctor's firm grip on her arm.

Their route wound and twisted, sloping generally downwards. Eventually Manda felt a warm dry breeze blowing against her face, and saw a set of heavy metal doors ahead. As they approached, the doors opened, revealing a brilliantly lit room. The light pulsed with quickly changing tints, as if there were a fairground roundabout in there, with coloured electric bulbs.

Manda glanced at the Doctor. He was smiling broadly, nodding to himself, as if he were eagerly awaiting the meeting with whatever was

in the room. She hoped that his optimism was justified. She hoped, too, that whatever he was going to say to the Recruiter would cure Charles, would make him remember her, would make him back into the brother she had known.

They reached the doors, went inside. Manda gasped.

The room was huge, as huge as the inside of a cathedral.

Bigger. And the Recruiter almost filled it. At first all she could see was silvery metal and coloured light: then details resolved themselves as her eyes adjusted to the brightness.

The Recruiter was a huge cylinder lying on the ground, tapering at each end to a wire-thin tip. It was perhaps fifty feet high and three hundred long. The centre section -

perhaps a hundred and fifty feet long - was open, long metal doors folded back above it like several pairs of rectilinear wings. In the exposed space, upright cylinders of metal, like truncated pillars connected by cobwebs of cabling, glittered with intricate patterns of colour. It seemed almost alive. The light made swirling patterns on the white tiled floor that surrounded the machine, shifted and danced off the human and Biune guards who stood around, rifles shouldered, their eyes on the Doctor.

The Doctor doffed his hat again. ‘Pleased to make your acquaintance,’ he said aloud. ‘I’m the Doctor, and this is my friend Manda.’ But there was a frown on his face.

The frown deepened as the ground began to shake, and a huge, metallic chiming noise filled the air. Slowly, it resolved itself into a voice, a booming, mechanical, crescendo of a voice, loud enough to make Manda’s ears hurt.

‘YOU HAVE ATTEMPTED TO DAMAGE ME.’

The Doctor nodded. ‘I didn’t intend anything permanent. I just wanted to get your attention. You see, I think you should stop this war.’ His voice became louder, harder. ‘ *Now*.’

‘THE REASONS FOR YOUR ATTEMPT AREN’T

IMPORTANT. WHAT INTERESTS ME IS THE

KNOWLEDGE YOU MUST POSSESS IN ORDER TO HAVE

MADE SUCH AN ATTEMPT. I REQUIRE THAT

KNOWLEDGE FROM YOU.'

At this, the Doctor seemed to lose patience. 'I require some knowledge, too!' he shouted. 'What do you think you're doing? Don't you know how many sentient beings have died because of this ridiculous war that you're running?'

'THAT DOESN'T MATTER,' said the huge, echoing voice of the Recruiter. 'WHAT MATTERS IS HOW YOU'RE GOING

TO GET ME OUT OF HERE.'

Chapter 14

'It's all right,' said the Q'ell officer softly, clicking the joints of his long thin fingers and tilting his head on one side. 'You won't suffer. We will give you a chemical sedative before we cut your throat.'

Benny looked around at the room: it was walled with red brick, decorated with tattered tapestries, shards of china and shiny brass buttons taken from uniforms. Diamond-shaped lamps hung on the walls, giving off a soft, amber-coloured light. She struggled against the ropes holding her, heard the wooden post she was tied to creak, felt it shift a little. But she knew that any hope of escape was wishful thinking: the officer's rifle was leaning against the edge of the desk, and occasional chitinous noises told her that the guards who had brought her into the room were still standing behind her. In case she was in any doubt as to the primary purpose of the room, a look down at the guttering beneath her feet, stained with several different types of blood, was enough to confirm it.

Benny had glanced down several times by now, and each time wished she hadn't.

'I don't want you to kill me at all,' she said patiently. 'I can help you. I know things you don't.'

The officer pulled the tattered combat jacket he was wearing tighter around himself, as if he were cold. 'So you informed my men. That's very useful. If you could tell me those things now, before we administer the sedative, I would be very grateful.'

Benny closed her eyes for a moment. How could any apparently sentient being be this stupid?

‘Look,’ she said. ‘I’ve overcome the control of the Recruiter. I could - ’

‘Yes, yes, so do many animals, in time. It isn’t important.’

‘I’m not an animal!’ protested Benny. ‘How can I be an animal if I’m talking to you?’

For the first time she seemed to have the officer’s full attention. His head snapped up, his mouth opened, his thin tongue emerged and began tasting the air.

‘You did say that you broke the power of the Recruiter?’

At last! thought Benny. ‘Yes. I - ’

‘So you were in its power, and then you broke free?’

‘Yes. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. So did Gabrielle - I helped her. If I could do it, then so could others -

’

‘Any that succeed in escaping from the power of the Recruiter, and aren’t killed by the Recruiter, are killed by us.

Does that answer your question?’ The officer pulled at his jacket again. ‘Now, as I have said, you will not suffer.’ He began pouring something out of a battered hip flask on to a piece of khaki-coloured cloth: to her horror, Benny smelled the sweet scent of chloroform.

‘Think about the weapons you’ve got,’ she said desperately. ‘Those huge ground-engines, the artillery on the Citadel. Why aren’t those weapons available to the combatants in the war?’

‘The True People need to have the best weapons, in order to defend the Recruiter.’ He had finished soaking the cloth now. He stood up and walked around his desk towards Benny. ‘The Recruiter is all-important to the war effort.’

The cloth was inches from Benny’s face now: the fumes were making her dizzy. She struggled to keep a clear head, to think quickly before it was too late. ‘Why is it so important to the Neutral Brigade that the war carries on? You’re Neutral, aren’t you?’

The officer tilted his head to one side: Benny wondered if the gesture corresponded to a nod, a shake of the head, a shrug, a smile -

'We will be released from service when the war is over,'

said the Q'ell calmly. 'We will be allowed to return to our homes and families.' He pushed the cloth over Benny's mouth: frantically she jerked her head away from it, took a gulp of relatively clear air.

But not clear enough. Her voice was slurred as she said,

'That's ridiculous!' Suddenly she realized what it was that her conversations with the Q'ell reminded her of. And what the Q'ell were doing when they paused and put their heads on one side.

They were listening. Listening to the voice of authority, to

-

'You don't control the Recruiter!' she yelled. But the Q'ell simply pushed the cloth over her mouth again, this time holding on to the back of her head with his other hand, so that she couldn't jerk away. 'The Recruiter controls you!'

But her voice was muffled by the cloth. The image of the officer blurred and danced in front of her eyes, then slowly faded away.

The last thing she heard was the officer's voice saying,

'A lot of them tell us that before they die.'

'THE MOST URGENT MATTER IS THE REPAIR OF THE

COORDINATE SEARCH DEVICE ON THE MATTER

TRANSPORTER. WITHOUT IT I'M RESTRICTED TO THE

DIRECTION GIVEN BY THE LIMITED PSIONIC POWERS

OF THE Q'ELL. THIS DIRECTS ME ONLY TO PEOPLE AT

A SIMILAR LEVEL OF TECHNOLOGY TO THE Q'ELL.

THESE PEOPLE HAVE PROVED TO BE OF LIMITED USE.'

Manda, her hands over her ears to muffle the Recruiter's booming voice, watched in amusement as the Doctor searched his pockets. 'I'm

sorry,' he said at last, but I seem to have left my screwdriver somewhere else. Perhaps if you could return my ship, I could be more help. I could give you the coordinates but then you'd know those, wouldn't you?'

'WITHOUT THE COORDINATE SEARCH DEVICE

THAT INFORMATION ISN'T ANY USE,' boomed the Recruiter.

'And there's a hole in the bucket, too,' said the Doctor.

'WHAT BUCKET?' asked the Recruiter.

The Doctor began casting around the space in front of the glittering web of colour that was the Recruiter, for all the world as if he were looking for the missing bucket. Charles and the various alien beasts looked on in obvious confusion.

Manda giggled. She couldn't help it: the conversation between the Doctor and the Recruiter reminded her of a music-hall comedy act she'd seen with Charles when he'd come home on leave - except that the Doctor was a better comedian.

'Why can't you just repair yourself?' asked the Doctor suddenly.

'THE ENEMY PLASMA BOLT DESTROYED SOME OF

MY FEEDBACK CIRCUITS. I HAVEN'T GOT ACCESS TO

MY REPAIR SYSTEMS. AND I'M TOO FAR FROM THE

NEAREST ALLIED BASE TO SIGNAL FOR HELP.'

'The enemy?' The Doctor frowned. 'Perhaps you could tell just who you are.'

'I'M A LEARNING WEAPON. MY JOB IS TO ANALYSE

THE ENEMY AND LEARN HOW TO KILL THEM ALL, WITH

MINIMUM COLLATERAL CASUALTIES.'

'And the enemy are - ?' The comedian's manner had gone: the Doctor was staring at the Recruiter, his eyes hard.

'THE CERACAI.'

‘The Ceracai? The *Ceracai*? But they - ‘ The Doctor frowned. ‘They live half a galaxy away.’ The comedian’s manner had gone: he was staring at the Recruiter, his eyes hard. ‘And they haven’t fought a serious war for centuries.’

‘MY INSTRUCTIONS ARE THAT THEY MUST BE

DESTROYED.’

‘I’m afraid your instructions are way past their use-by date.’ The Doctor paused, pulled at the lapels of his jacket.

‘You know, I think it’s time that you forgot your duty and went into retirement. I know of a culture where machines are accepted on equal terms with other beings; you could go there.’

‘MY INSTRUCTIONS ARE TO LEARN HOW TO

DESTROY THE CERACAI AND TO DESTROY THEM. I HAVEN’T ANY CHOICE.’

‘No, you wouldn’t have, I suppose,’ said the Doctor. He paused, gazed around him, winked at Manda. ‘But if you have a learning algorithm built in, I should be able to reprogram you. I could give you a choice:

‘ANY ATTEMPT TO INTERFERE WITH MY CORE

PROGRAMMING WILL CAUSE ME TO DESTROY YOU.’

Manda felt a cold shiver at this casual announcement, but the Doctor didn’t seem to be worried. He merely said,

‘That’s a pity. There doesn’t seem to be anything I can do for you, then.’

‘THERE IS. I WANT YOUR TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE.’

‘But in doing what, exactly?’

‘I NEED YOU TO ASSIST THE OTHER ALIENS HERE

IN DEVELOPING THE NECESSARY TECHNOLOGY TO

LET ME GET AWAY FROM THIS PLANET AND DEFEAT

THE CERACAI.’

‘I’m surprised you can’t do that of your own accord.’

‘I DON’T HAVE THE NECESSARY KNOWLEDGE ANY

MORE. I’VE ATTEMPTED TO GENERATE IT IN THE

MINDS OF THE LOCAL POPULATION, BUT MY

STRATEGY HASN’T BEEN SUCCESSFUL.’

‘Your strategy?’

‘I USED WHAT RESOURCES I HAD TO SUPPORT A WAR THEY WERE FIGHTING. A WAR IS THE MOST

EFFECTIVE METHOD OF ENSURING RAPID

TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCE.’

‘Is it?’ The Doctor suddenly jumped into the air, pointed his umbrella at the Recruiter as if it were a weapon. His face was twisted into a mask of anger, his lips drawn back, his teeth bared. For a moment, Manda was more afraid of him than she was of the Recruiter. ‘Is it now? How long has this been going on? Have you any idea how many sentient beings have died because of this war you’ve promoted?

Technical advance, indeed! The notion’s incredible -

ludicrous!’

‘I’LL ANSWER YOUR QUESTIONS,’ said the Recruiter,

‘THE WAR’S BEEN GOING ON FOR FOURTEEN

HUNDRED AND FIVE YEARS LOCAL, AND THE NUMBER

OF SENTIENT BEINGS KILLED IS TWO BILLION, EIGHT

HUNDRED AND FORTY SIX MILLION, FOURTEEN

THOUSAND AND THIRTY-TWO.’

‘And the "technical advance"?’ spat the Doctor.

‘IT HASN’T YET BEEN ACHIEVED.’

‘I rest my case. You’ll get no help from me.’ The Doctor whirled on his heel, began to walk out of the room. ‘Come on, Manda.’

Manda noticed that Charles had his gun aimed at the Doctor. She stood, unable to move, staring at the gun, at the finger tightening on the trigger.

'Doctor!' she shouted. 'What about Charles? We can't just leave him!'

The little man stopped in the doorway, turned back to face her. 'Ah, yes, Charles,' he said. 'Don't shoot me yet, Lieutenant. I've something else to say to the Recruiter which it might want to hear.'

Manda watched Charles's finger slacken on the trigger, though he didn't lower the gun.

'I'M LISTENING,' boomed the voice of the Recruiter.

'This isn't a war you're in charge of. Real war is about suffering, about boredom. About waiting in the dark and the cold and the wet wondering if your friends have been killed.

Wondering if you'll be killed. It's about being afraid and confused and just trying to survive. But all you've got is an army of toy soldiers.' The Doctor gestured at Charles.

'They're sentient beings, but you've turned them into machines. They kill each other endlessly and don't even care why they're doing it. You've stifled every atom of individuality and creativity in them. How could they possibly come up with any "technical advances"? How can they possibly do anything at all, except kill each other? This war could go on for ever, and

you'll never achieve anything.'

There was a long silence. Finally the Recruiter said,

'YOU'RE CORRECT. I'VE MADE A MISTAKE. THE WAR

WILL NOW STOP.' A slight pause. 'IT'S EVEN MORE

IMPORTANT NOW THAT I HAVE YOUR ASSISTANCE.'

'And if I help you?'

'I'LL FOLLOW MY INSTRUCTIONS AND DESTROY

THE CERACAI.'

'Then I won't help you.'

‘IF YOU DON’T ASSIST ME LIEUTENANT SUTTON

WILL KILL YOU.’

Roz was clinging on to the rim of the cockpit, shouting. But although she was only three metres away, Chris could hear no more than snatches of what she said over the roar of the engine and the buffeting of the slipstream. Frost was forming on the top of her flying helmet, and on the shoulders of her jacket.

‘... down!’ she yelled. ‘Wings ... nice!’

‘What’s nice?’ asked Chris in bewilderment. Roz’s expression was grim, not the face of someone bringing good news of any kind.

‘Ice!’ bawled Roz. ‘Wings!’ She pointed at one of them.

‘... gotta land!’

Chris looked at the wing, and saw at last what she meant. A thick coating of frost had formed on the wings and the struts between them. Small pieces flew off into the slipstream, but more was forming all the time. The weight would eventually drag the plane down: or maybe break the fragile wings away from the fuselage.

Either way, they had to get down, and quickly. Chris glanced at the altimeter: it showed 4500 metres. He looked over the side. He could see no trace of the other planes, but he knew they were probably there somewhere, waiting for just this opportunity.

He was about to look back, to tell Roz to strap herself in, when a pinpoint flicker of rainbow light caught his attention.

He frowned. Another enemy plane? But it had seemed to be on the ground.

Then he saw another flicker, and another, and then a whole galaxy of them, spread out across the city below. Thin clouds near the horizon lit up with the reflection of the light.

The sky gleamed blue-purple.

Then everything was dark again.

He looked at Roz. Her face in the moonlight seemed dark now, after the brilliant lightning.

‘What was that?’ he shouted. But she didn’t reply, only shook her head slowly and sank from sight.

Then Chris noticed the pale glow of dawn in the eastern sky, and realized. It was six o’clock. The light had been the transmat operating, picking up its millions of targets.

The children of Europe were gone. They were too late to save anyone. Amalie had died for nothing. Perhaps the Doctor and Benny, too. It had all been for nothing.

Chris pushed forward on the stick, and watched the misty horizon rise over the whirling propeller. But as it rose, the plane tilted to one side. Chris pulled the stick over, and then back, but it didn’t have much effect: the plane’s nose continued to lower, until it was spiralling towards the ground, out of control.

Us too, thought Chris. The ice on the wings must have got too heavy. And: not without a fight.

Grimly, he began to struggle with the controls.

Manda watched as her brother walked forward and calmly put the gun against the back of the Doctor’s neck. Suddenly she realized that she couldn’t just watch any more. This wasn’t a play, or a puppet show. She had to do something.

‘Charles!’ she called.

Charles didn’t respond.

She took a step forward. ‘You must know me! I’m Manda!

Your sister!’

‘Sister?’ echoed Charles faintly. He glanced at Manda, but there was no recognition in his eyes. ‘What is - ?’

‘Daddy died, you know,’ said Manda quietly.

Charles frowned. ‘Who’s Daddy? What rank is he?’

Manda looked at the Doctor. ‘He doesn’t know, does he?’

The Doctor shook his head, apparently oblivious of the gun touching his neck. ‘I’m afraid it will take more than words to make him remember, Manda.’

Manda advanced another step. She was less than an arm's length from her brother now.

'Charles,' she said. 'You can't just kill someone. It's wrong. You know that.'

Suddenly Charles took the gun away from the Doctor's neck. Manda felt a brief surge of relief, then saw the gun swing to cover her.

'Charles!' she shouted again.

The revolver spat, jerked in her brother's hand, and at the same moment something heavy hit her in the stomach.

She fell down on to the hard floor, heard the Doctor shouting, became aware that her stomach *hurt*. Hurt incredibly, searingly, as if someone had torn it open -

Then she saw the blood, the blood streaming out of her, soaking into her uniform and running across the floor. Her body began to shake.

'Oh no,' she said, aware of the breath rattling in her throat as she spoke. 'I'm going to die.' It seemed impossible, even as she spoke it. People her age didn't die. But the pain was so bad, so bad it was almost possible to believe that it might kill her but surely it couldn't, surely not, I must be going to live, I was always going to live before so why not now?

She saw the Doctor's face hanging in front of her, curiously grey and grainy, dimly felt a hand touch her cheek.

Then there was only rasping breath, the smooth, cold floor -

- shaking, cold, Mummy, I'm so cold and it hurts -

- pray for me -

Chapter 15

There was a piece of glass.

A piece of blue-and-gold-coloured glass, knife-shaped, gleaming in the lamplight, gripped by a clawlike hand.

Benny decided she should be afraid of the glass. Afraid of the way it

blurred and swam in her vision, of the sharp, curved edge of it.

But why?

Then the piece of glass was taken away, and she saw the hard, pale, chitinous face of the Q'ell officer.

She remembered.

She jolted her head aside, sprang up, ready to deliver a rabbit-punch to the Q'ell's thoracic hinge. As far as she knew, it was the best way of knocking out an insectoid.

The next thing she knew, she was on the floor, with hard, chitinous arms around her, moaning and struggling feebly.

'There has been a change in the situation,' said the officer's voice, almost in her ear. 'We need your help.' Benny felt her stomach heave, was violently sick on to the cold stone. She smelled the fumes of chloroform in her vomit: for a moment she thought she was going to pass out again. But the dizziness receded. She got up, wiped her lips and stared at the Q'ell.

'My *help*?' she said. She looked at the piece of glass in the alien's hand, and realized it was a small bowl, not a knife at all. A pinkish liquid swirled around inside it, giving off wisps of steam: probably it was something that was intended to revive her.

Hotel Du Q'ell, she thought. We chloroform you, threaten to cut your throat, and revive you with herbal tea afterwards.

Full English breakfast extra. She began to laugh, a dry, choking laugh that tasted of vomit and ended in a fit of coughing. 'Well,' she concluded, 'all I can say is that if you really expect me to help you now, you'd better ask me very nicely.'

'We have lost contact with the Recruiter,' the Q'ell said, apparently oblivious to Benny's sarcasm. 'We want to know what to do.'

'What to do?' Benny stared at the hard alien face, saw that the eyes were twitching in their sockets, and the whole head was making minute jolts, clicking against the top of the thorax. The Q'ell, she realized, was deeply disturbed.

Whatever had happened had evidently undermined his sense of identity: which figured, she thought, if that identity had been

dependent on a telepathic link with a machine.

She wondered what had happened to the Recruiter, and why it had happened now, after fourteen hundred years. She grinned as she realized the likely answer.

The Q'ell was still staring at her, his body twitching.

Benny took a deep breath, tried to forget that this creature had been about to have her for lunch. 'Why do you think I can tell you what to do?' she asked carefully.

'The other animal said that you had a friend you called the Doctor, and that you kept talking to him although he wasn't there.'

'The other animal? You mean Gabrielle? You'd better start remembering that we've got names, if you expect any help.' Benny stood up. She tried to ignore the wobbly feeling in her legs and the humming in her ears that resulted from the effort, and looked around her. For the first time she noticed that it was a different room to that in which she'd lost consciousness. The diamond-shaped lamps were the same, but the walls were darker, the decorations more subdued.

There was even a window: a vertical slit with a wide inner sill on which stood a gleaming machine-gun, set on runners so as to provide a wide angle of fire.

'We want you to talk to the Doctor now,' the Q'ell was saying. 'We want you to tell him to communicate with the Recruiter for us.'

Benny frowned. She decided not to admit, for the time being, that she couldn't. Instead she asked, 'Why not communicate with the Recruiter for yourselves?'

'I've told you. We can't.'

'It's in the Citadel, isn't it?'

'Yes, but we are not permitted access.'

Benny looked at the machine-gun, wondered if it could be taken off its mounting. It looked light enough to carry.

Aloud she said, 'Don't you think that might have changed too? Given the "change in the situation"?'

A pause. Benny didn't look round, but she could imagine the Q'ell

tilting his head on one side, searching the telepathic airwaves, failing to get a response. Finally he said, ‘What do you think?’

Benny grinned, turned to face the alien. ‘I think we ought to give it a try,’ she said. ‘Get some of your people together.’

As an afterthought she added, ‘And Gabrielle, too.’

But even as she said it she felt a chill pass over her, and she knew. She knew even before the Q’ell said, ‘Gabrielle?

The other animal? She has been processed. Did you need her for anything?’

Benny could have asked what ‘processed’ meant, but she didn’t need to. There was a humming in her ears, a red mist in front of her vision. She turned back to the window, to the gleaming machine-gun. She could see the knurled bolts that secured it now. It was only a matter of releasing them, then she could pick up the gun and fire it, fire it at the Q’ell until the clip was empty and the alien was a mass of pulp and broken chitin, squashed against the wall, squashed like the *bug* it was -

She ran to the window, kneeled down by the gun, began beating her fists against the stone below the mounting. The Q’ell was shouting something, but she couldn’t hear it over the pounding of her blood in her ears. She didn’t want to hear it; she just kept beating her fists on the stone, harder and harder, watching the mist in front of her eyes thicken. Finally, when the pain began to get through from her hands, she stopped.

She heard a metallic click behind her. ‘It has gone mad,’

said a Q’ell voice. ‘If it gets up, kill it.’

Very slowly, Benny turned round. Through tear-blurred eyes she saw three Q’ell, rifles aimed at her.

She swallowed. ‘I’m not mad,’ she said. She hoped the Q’ell would think it was normal that her voice was jumping all over the audio spectrum. ‘It’s just a ritual my people have when a friend dies.’

One by one, the rifles were lowered. Benny stared at her bloodied fists, realized suddenly that they were hurting like hell.

Slowly, she stood up. ‘OK, then,’ she said. ‘Get your troops together. It’s time to meet the Recruiter.’

Chris had managed to stabilize the descent by pulling the stick over to the right - but it was still a descent, and it was still faster than he would like. He glanced at the altimeter: it showed 2500 metres. Almost half-way down already. He could only hope that the ice on the wings would melt before they got too near the ground. That would at least give him a chance of landing under control.

He looked over the side trying to find a suitable place to land. The city of Bristol glittered below him: gaslit streets, moonlit parks, the glistening line of a river. An open space would be best, he thought. With an effort, he stretched his legs out to push the rudder pedals, steering the plane towards the largest of the parks. He became aware of Chevillon's body next to his, now rigid and immobile. It occurred to him that he ought to get Chevillon out of his straps and dump him over the side, so as to give himself more room to move in the cramped space of the cockpit. But he wasn't sure he could face doing it. Besides, he would need Roz's help, and though she was only three metres behind him, he had no way of signalling to her.

He decided not to think about it, but simply watched as the moonlit expanse of grass, blobbed with dark trees, slowly came closer. The ice on the wings did begin to melt - he could see fragments of the stuff whirling away in the slipstream - but not fast enough. The plane was still dropping.

He pulled at the throttle cable, but the engine wouldn't give any more. He cautiously edged the stick back, but the nose didn't come up and the wings wobbled dangerously. More ice would have formed on the front of the wings than on the back, he realized; the plane was being physically tipped forward. He glanced over his shoulder, saw the back of Roz's flight helmet at the bottom of the shell-pocked slope of the fuselage. Staying put, he thought, in case of a rough landing.

Which made sense.

He was relieved to see, as the ground grew closer, wide spaces of flat-looking grass between the trees. At last he managed to level off: he was sure that if he flew around at low altitude for a few more minutes he had a fair chance of landing safely. He decided to use the time to pick out the best possible site.

After a couple of minutes, he saw a place where a wide road ran along the edge of the park, and decided that it would do. The surface was harder, but there was less chance of hidden bumps or holes in the ground. Chris turned the plane sharply around above a cluster of

buildings, preparing for what he hoped would be the final approach to the landing.

Then, ahead, he saw a column of moving lights. He stared at them for a moment, then realized that they were vehicles of some kind. They had the same primitive, boxy, metallic look as the plane he was flying. The lights from the vehicles illuminated the façade of the building he was flying over and he saw the words 'UNIVERSAL TOYS' painted in white across the red-brick walls, with a crude image of a teddy bear.

'Roz!' he shouted, though he knew she couldn't hear him. 'I think we've found the factory!' He had known it was somewhere on this side of the city: the Doctor had mentioned that Benny took her lunches in the park. Chris had the sudden, crazy notion that if they could just get inside the factory everything would be all right. They would get the children back somehow. He imagined finding the transmat unit, pressing the recall button - of course there would be a recall button -

Something loomed up ahead: the trees lining the park.

Chris opened the throttle, pulled back on the stick. The plane jerked upwards; there was a clattering noise as the uppermost twigs of the trees brushed past the wheels.

Ahead, the ground was flat and grassy for several hundred metres. Forget the road, he decided, just get down.

Keeping the stick back, Chris slowly let in the throttle.

With the nose up, and the speed low, the plane should stall.

Hopefully, it would do that when it was only about a metre off the ground. But Chris was acutely aware that, though the speed they were travelling at was less than a tenth that of a standard flitter, it was still quite fast enough to kill them if anything went wrong.

The dark shapes of the last of the trees glided below.

The plane slowed. Chris had no idea of the stalling speed, and not much space to get it wrong in. Chris remembered what Chevillon had said about volatile fuels, and switched the engine off.

The plane dropped.

The grey shape of a statue reared up ahead: he hadn't seen it against the grass in the silvery light. Frantically, Chris tramped on the rudder

pedals. He felt the plane turn, then hit the ground. There was a crunch of metal as a wing hit the statue, and the plane jolted violently. Chris was almost thrown out of the cockpit as the fuselage tilted forward.

Something hit him on the shoulder, then on the head. He clung on to the stick, which was now behind him for some reason. He heard Roz shouting, saw the bright glare of a light ahead of them, a light that hadn't been there before. He heard the roar of engines, a voice shouting.

Then he fell. More light exploded in his head, then everything went dark.

* * *

When Josef woke up, he knew that the war was over, and that he ought to ask his sergeant for instructions. He rolled over on the oddly hard surface of his bunk, opened his mouth to call out Ingrid's name -

And then felt the hard-packed earth under his palms, and remembered where he was. And what had happened to Ingrid.

He sat up slowly, shivering, and looked around him. The cracked red-brick walls of the dugout he'd taken shelter in stared back at him. A dusty shaft of sunlight shone through a broken wooden door.

The war was over and Ingrid was still dead. He could still hear the hollow snap of her neck breaking, the gurgling, choking sound of her death. His sergeant wouldn't be able to order her back to life again. No one could.

The war was over and it didn't matter. It didn't make any difference to anything. He still had to avenge Ingrid, if he could: it was the only thing he could think of that made any sense.

Josef stood up, aware that he was hungry and thirsty. He wasn't sure what he could do about being hungry, but there was an iron tank in the corner of the dugout that collected rainwater through a pipe that went to the roof. The tap was broken, but there was a rusty hole in the top, just big enough for him to push his metal canteen through. The water tasted metallic and bitter, but it was water. Josef drank what he needed, filled the canteen again, then walked to the door. He wriggled between the broken pieces of wood and into a passageway which sloped up to the surface. The sun was shining directly through the entrance, and he couldn't see anything through the light. He wondered if he ought to wait until the sun had moved round, but

eventually decided against it. He couldn't hear anything. Nothing had tried to shoot him. It ought to be safe.

He walked slowly up the passageway, moving as quietly as possible and keeping close to the wall. He crawled the last couple of metres, poked his head out cautiously. He saw a field of dry soil, littered with broken bricks and surrounded by a high stone wall. It sloped away to the north, and beyond it was the huge building where Ingrid's killers had gone. The stone façade of the building was grey-white in the sunlight, broken by the dark lines of slit windows and patches of green creeper. Josef could see the ground-engines that guarded it, squatting down on the stone courtyard.

Squatting down?

He frowned, peered closer. There didn't seem to be any smoke coming from the stacks: whoever was operating the big machines seemed to have simply parked them, out there in the open. Cautiously he made his way around the edge of the field, keeping under the cover of the wall until he came to the crumbled breach in it that overlooked the courtyard.

Yes. The ground-engines were definitely parked. One of the insect-things was slumped against one of them, apparently asleep. He crept over the wall and lowered himself on to a bank covered in dry, yellowing moss, scraping his hand on a sharp piece of broken stone as he did so. The insect-thing was now hidden by the bulk of the ground-engine. He couldn't see any other movement in the courtyard. Behind the ground-engine, a huge door gaped open.

Josef stared at the gaping door. If he could get into the building, he reasoned, then he could probably get near to where the enemy were. Then he could destroy the enemy

- if necessary by destroying himself. The self-destruct mechanism on a ground-engine of this size ought to be able to destroy a lot of things.

Josef wanted to destroy a lot of things. He wanted to destroy everything, if he could. He began to creep forward across the courtyard.

'Halt!' shouted a voice.

Chris opened his eyes, saw a line of khaki-clad men with long rifles in their hands. Roz was standing in front of them, shouting. 'We've got to get into the factory - '

‘This is a military operation! We have instructions to allow no one - ’

‘- only people who know what’s going on. I haven’t got sodding *time* to argue - ’

Haven’t got time? thought Chris blearily. Wasn’t it already too late? He struggled to get up, but fell back again on to the wet grass. He realized then that he must have been unconscious for a few moments. He checked in his pocket to make sure he still had the gun that Chevillon had given him.

‘Don’t move!’ shouted the voice. ‘We have you surrounded!’

Then Roz was standing over him. ‘Chris? You OK now?

Thank the goddess for that, at least.’

One of the khaki-clad figures was standing behind her, also looking down at Chris. ‘I’m sorry, sir, but your servant seems to have been rendered quite mad by the crash. We’ll do everything we can to help you on your way, but we have to point out that this is a restricted area - ’

‘She’s not -’ Chris broke off, swallowed. His throat was unexpectedly dry and his jaw hurt. He wondered how long he’d been unconscious. ‘- not my servant,’ he finished with an effort. ‘She’s my partner. And she’s not mad. We really do need to get into the factory. That’s why we came here. That’s why Chevillon’s dead.’

The officer frowned and glanced over his shoulder. ‘I think we’d better take them with us. The colonel might want to speak to them.’

‘We haven’t got time,’ Roz was saying again. But the soldier had turned to his men and was shouting orders. A stretcher. Handcuffs.

Handcuffs? Chris tried to sit up again. This time he made it. He leaned against the side of the plane, pulled Chevillon’s gun, using his body to shield it from the line of soldiers.

Roz saw it, raised her right eyebrow about a millimetre, then nodded.

Chris moved the gun to where the soldiers could see it, took aim at the officer.

‘Adjudication service!’ he yelled. ‘Nobody move!’ Roz ran.

Chris heard the crack of a rifle, saw Roz duck.

‘Nobody move!’ he shouted again. He struggled to his feet, took a step forward and put the gun to the officer’s neck, at the same time keeping the man’s body between him and the line of soldiers.

It occurred to him that he was taking a hostage. He tried to remember his training on hostage-taking situations, and to anticipate what the others might do. Most likely they would try to negotiate: that would give Roz some time.

The officer shouted, ‘Shoot them, lads! Don’t worry about me!’

Chris swallowed hard. He’d reckoned without heroics.

Fortunately the soldiers seemed just as confused as he was: they glanced at each other or at their commander. One fired a shot into the air, well above Chris’s head.

Roz, he noticed, was gone.

He heard a muffled shout from the darkness behind the lamps, then a gunshot. Some of the soldiers turned round.

Chris saw Roz, perched on top of a wall, caught in a beam of light. Before he or anyone else could act, she’d jumped down.

Chris ducked and made a run for it, firing into the air.

‘Shoot to maim!’ shouted the officer. There was a single rifle shot, the thunk of a bullet hitting something near by.

Chris headed for the shadows, almost ran into a hedge. He could see a gate, the wall that Roz had been standing on.

‘Behind you!’ someone shouted. Chris concentrated on moving fast and dodging from side to side. A figure in a khaki uniform appeared ahead of him, blocking the way. He swerved, saw the man raise his rifle, raised his own gun.

The shot cracked out, the bullet thudded into his chest.

The underarmour absorbed the impact as it was supposed to, but none the less Chris staggered. Arms went around him from behind; he ducked, throwing his attacker to the ground.

Chris ran past the men, crossed the road, then jumped up on to the wall, scrabbling for a grip. He managed to pull himself up to the top just as another bullet thudded into the armour on his legs. He almost

fell off the other side, then sprinted across the courtyard. Roz was ahead of him: he could see her climbing in through a window, high up on the factory wall.

A piece of broken glass shattered explosively on the flagstones in front of him.

A rifle cracked behind him: he heard the bullet whizz past his ear. He turned round, shouted, 'We're on your side!

Martineau sent us! I'd explain but there isn't time!' As he spoke he caught himself wondering again why there wasn't time - why was Roz in such a hurry?

There was a shout from above: Roz. 'Chris! The TARDIS

is in here!' She was holding something in her hand: something with two small amber lights on it.

'Who is this Martineau?' The officer's voice, from somewhere beyond the wall. 'We really can't let you run around this place on some Frenchman's authority.'

'But it was the French who tipped you off to this, wasn't it?' asked Chris, making his way towards the drainpipe that Roz must have used to climb the wall.

'Our orders came from the Home Secretary - but yes, he did mention the French. If you'll just put down your gun and discuss the matter reasonably instead of playing the cat burglar, we can see if - '

'There isn't time!' grunted Chris. He was almost at the window now: and he was fairly sure that they wouldn't start shooting in the time it would take him to get inside.

A rifle cracked, sending chips of stone flying around his face.

Well, everyone can be wrong sometimes, thought Chris.

He swung himself on to the windowsill and through the broken pane, trusting his underarmour to protect him from the sharp edges of the glass.

As soon as he got inside, he heard Roz swearing.

There was a long corridor: he ran down it, came to the open door of a room in which the TARDIS stood between two heavily padded chairs,

near a wooden desk. Roz was standing in the middle of the room, with a heavy-looking metal box in her hands. Lights flickered on the box. Chris realized that it could only be the transmat master controller. It looked like a piece of cannibalized hyperdrive: a crudely attached linear ariel vibrated like the antenna of a giant insect.

Roz spoke without looking up. 'I figured that with all those kids to transmit they'd never have the energy to send them all at once. They'd have to send in series, which means series-processing the image data. Which takes time, yeah?'

Chris frowned. 'Yes, a few - '

Roz shrugged. Not enough time. They've gone. About five seconds before I got this bugger out of the desk.'

'Oh.' Chris swallowed. 'You didn't have to hang around for me, you know.'

Roz shrugged again. 'Don't blame yourself. I'd never have got away at all without your help.' She looked at the ground.

There was a short silence; then Chris heard the clatter of footsteps crossing the yard. He looked at Roz, then at the TARDIS. She nodded, put the transmat controller down and pulled the key out from a pocket of her jacket.

'I don't suppose the Doctor's in there,' said Chris, as he picked up the heavy controller. Roz just looked at him.

The TARDIS door swung open, revealing the white light of the console room. Chris staggered in, conscious of the sound of breaking glass from behind him. Roz quickly followed him.

'Get the door shut!' she snapped.

Chris almost dropped the transmat controller, ran to the console and flicked the switch. The door hummed shut behind them.

Now,' said Roz. 'Have you got any idea how to steer this thing? 'Cos I haven't.'

'But I thought -' Chris broke off. 'I mean, the Doctor -'

'You thought he'd be sitting here, just waiting for the good news, and he'd go and put everything right?' Roz gestured around the empty

white space of the console room.

‘Well, he isn’t. Have you got any suggestions?’

Chris stared at the console. He knew something about the piloting of the TARDIS - he’d seen the Doctor do it a few times, and the basics were easy enough. He walked around to the far side of the console. ‘This is the main dematerialization control,’ he said.

‘So? What the hell’s the use of that if we don’t know where we’re going?’

Chris remembered what Roz had said the previous evening, when the TARDIS had failed to turn up. ‘How can you be late in a time machine?’ he said.

‘Huh?’

Chris looked at the coordinate display on the console, frowned. ‘The last four digits must be the temporal coordinates, because they’re changing as we go forward in time at the normal rate,’ he said aloud.

‘So?’ asked Roz again.

‘So if I reset the coordinates for a couple of hours ago -’

He broke off, studied the changing figures, trying to judge the rate of change. The units didn’t make any sense, but the rate of change seemed fairly constant. He counted seconds, made some calculations.

There was a muffled thud from outside the TARDIS.

‘Open up!’ called the officer’s voice from the speakers of the scanner. ‘Open up or we fire!’

Chris punched in a series of coordinates that he hoped were in the past, and pressed the dematerialization control.

Now wait a minute,’ said Roz. ‘We’re not in any danger from them in here. What’re you trying to do?’

‘Go back in time. Stop it from happening. Save the kids.’

The time rotor began to rise and fall in the middle of the console. The scanner blanked out. Chris heard a faint crackling sound that might have been gunfire.

Roz stared, shook her head. ‘Chris, you can’t do that - ’

‘It’s the only thing we can do!’

‘It’s sodding impossible! The TARDIS will materialize inside itself!’ She ran up to the console, stared at the controls. ‘You’ve got to cancel - ’

She broke off as somewhere, deep within the TARDIS, a bell began to ring. Chris looked up, met Roz’s stare.

‘The cloister bell,’ she said softly after a moment. ‘Chris, there was only one possible thing that could’ve made this mess worse. And you’ve just done it.’

Lieutenant Sutton kept his gun aimed at the Doctor as the little man pulled at the cabling inside the open flank of the Recruiter. True, he had changed his mind and decided to help, after the girl had been shot: but he might change his mind again, or attempt sabotage. Anything was possible.

Thinking about the girl disturbed Sutton. He could see her out of the corner of his eye, lying in a pool of blood with the Doctor’s jacket over her body. Her face was exposed: she was still alive, as far as Sutton could tell, though her injury was clearly such that she would have to be reassigned to the kitchens.

That, surprisingly, was the thought that disturbed him.

She was dying. She was dying because he had shot her.

Why was that bad? He had been obeying orders. The girl had become a nuisance -possibly a danger. She had had to be destroyed.

But she had said she was his sister. That word meant something. Something to do with home.

But what was home? It felt warm, comfortable. It felt as though he should be there, rather than here, aiming a gun at a strange man in the guts of a vast machine.

But this was what he *had* to do. Wasn’t it?

Can’t find my way, he thought. Can’t find my way home.

The Recruiter’s huge voice broke into his thoughts.

‘TRANSMAT FIELD REACTIVATED.’

The Doctor stood up, dusted off his hands. Charles carefully kept him covered with the gun. ‘And your side of the bargain?’ said the little man. ‘My ship, so that I can save Manda’s life?’

Yes, thought Charles, yes. Save her life. Get the Doctor’s ship.

Please save her life. I didn’t mean to kill her. I want to take her home.

‘DOCTOR,’ boomed the Recruiter. ‘I CAN’T LOCATE

THE ARTON ENERGY SIGNATURE WHICH YOU

DESCRIBED. IT ISN’T ANYWHERE IN THIS REGION OF

SPACE. IT LOOKS AS IF YOUR SHIP’S BEEN

DESTROYED.’

Chapter 16

Josef kept his hands on the steering control, felt the warm metal under his hands, the shifting floor of the cab under his feet. It was familiar, it was good.

Ahead, the hallway he had driven into sloped steadily downwards. It was just big enough to accommodate the frame of the huge ground-engine: from the way the feet rang on the floor, he guessed it was solid stone.

He didn’t know where the hallway was leading, but he knew there would be killing at the end of it.

The controls hadn’t been too difficult to get used to. They were on a larger scale than the ground-engines that Josef had driven before, and he’d had to struggle to reach them, but he’d managed. Fortunately the boiler had been at full pressure, so he didn’t need a stoker.

As soon as he’d started to unfold the legs, he’d heard the clang of bullets on the cabin armour. But the insect-thing had made the mistake of standing in front of the ground-engine, and Josef had simply gunned it down with the machine-gun.

Then he’d taken the big machine into the building.

Inside, more of the insect-things, and more satisfyingly, an Ogron, had

fired at him and been dispatched in their turn.

After that Josef had used the turret gun to demolish the wall at the back of the parking bay and had barged the ground-engine through the gap, careless of minor damage.

That didn't matter now. All that mattered was killing.

Josef watched the walls of the hallway, steered with care so as to keep the ground-engine between them. Ahead there was light, white electric light, steadily growing brighter. Josef smiled. It wouldn't be long now.

Soon he would come to the place where the killing was needed.

Benny heard the voice at about the same time as she saw the light. The light was silvery, but filled with changing hints of colour. She couldn't hear exactly what the voice was saying - the sheer volume of it echoing along the corridors reduced it to an almost meaningless booming - but she was sure she'd caught the word 'Doctor'.

She quickened her pace. Behind her, the Q'ell rustled and clicked, like an army of locusts. Which is what they are, she thought: vaguely human-shaped and apparently intelligent, but locusts, none the less. An amoral swarm, eating anything they see.

Not for the first time, she wondered about the wisdom of bringing them with her. But then, she supposed, she could hardly have stopped them. They had the guns.

She turned a corner, saw a doorway ahead, brilliant white light within. And a figure, crouching down against a mass of glittering optic circuitry. A small man in a linen shirt and fedora hat. Benny grinned broadly, accelerated to a trot.

Then she saw the second man. The one with the gun, pointing it at the Doctor. She stopped quickly, but not quickly enough: he saw her, started to turn.

She swore, flung herself against the wall. Why was nothing ever straightforward where the Doctor was involved?

The huge machine voice spoke again. Benny was close enough now to hear the words: 'I'LL NOW PROCEED WITH

THE DESTRUCTION OF THE CERACAI.'

The Doctor had seen her now; she saw him wink, and close his hand around a piece of cabling that flickered with colour.

'How do you intend doing that?'

'THE INFORMATION IS CLASSIFIED.'

The Doctor yanked at the cable. 'Unclassify it,' he snapped. 'Or you might find your transmat system disabled again. Permanently.'

Benny knew enough about the Doctor to tell that he was very angry. But she knew enough about machine intelligences to know that it wouldn't make any difference.

The Recruiter wouldn't even notice: it would only take account of the facts.

The man with the gun - whom Benny recognized with a shock as Charles Sutton - swung back to cover the Doctor.

Benny crept forward, keeping her body close to the wall. She saw other guards, a mix of Biune and Ogrons, saw them raising their guns. She heard metallic clicks behind her as the Q'ell readied their own weapons.

'Wait!' she shouted. She heard the Doctor shouting at the same time: they were both silenced by the huge voice of the Recruiter.

'DON'T FIRE PROJECTILE WEAPONS IN THIS AREA NOW. VITAL CIRCUITS ARE EXPOSED.'

As it was speaking, Benny reached the door of the room.

She took in the size and shape of the Recruiter, saw ports opening in the silver metal to reveal the characteristic fish-eye energy lenses of high-intensity lasers.

She glanced over her shoulder, saw the Q'ell with their heads tilted to one side. Obviously they were getting instructions again.

Their rifles swung to cover her, and the Doctor.

Benny shrugged. 'Never trust anyone who eats your friends, that's what I say,' she muttered.

The Doctor said, 'If they shoot me now, my weight will break the cable. If you shoot anyone else, I'll break it anyway.

And if you don't tell me what you're planning to do, I'll break it.'

And he's out of the field of fire of the lasers, thought Benny. She grinned again. Trust the Doctor to think of everything.

'I'LL EXPLAIN,' said the Recruiter suddenly. Benny's grin broadened. And trust a machine to be logical. No way out except to tell the truth.

'THERE WERE ITEMS IN TRANSIT WHEN THE

TRANSMAT WAS REPAIRED. THESE ITEMS HAVE

SUFFICIENT MASS THAT, IF THEY'RE SENT BACK TO

SOURCE OUT OF PHASE, A LOT OF ENERGY WILL BE

CREATED BY THE CONVERSION OF THEIR MASS. THIS

ENERGY WILL BE ENOUGH TO LET ME TRANSMAT THE

SOURCE PLANET, ALSO OUT OF PHASE, TO A

LOCATION WITHIN ITS OWN SUN.'

Benny swallowed. Given the set-up of the transmat, the source planet had to be the Earth. Which was impossible.

The Earth couldn't be destroyed, or the whole of history would be changed. Maybe the Doctor hadn't got it figured out after all. Or maybe -

The Recruiter was still talking. 'THE ENERGY CREATED

BY THE CONVERSION OF THE PLANET'S MASS WILL BE

ENOUGH FOR ME TO VAPORIZE ALL PLANETS WITHIN

THE CERACAI DOMINIONS, IF FOCUSED THROUGH THE

TRANSMAT SYSTEM AT A SUITABLE PHASE ANGLE.

THAT WAY I CAN DESTROY THE CERACAI DOMINIONS

IN ONLY THREE POINT TWO EIGHT DAYS.'

Benny wondered how big the Ceracai dominions were.

How many planets the Recruiter was programmed to destroy.

Judging by the amount of energy it thought it needed, the answer had to be in the thousands. She glanced at the Doctor, saw that his face was pale.

'When does this start?' he muttered.

'IT'S ALREADY UNDER WAY. THE FIRST PHASE

DETONATION WILL OCCUR ON EARTH IN FOUR POINT

TWO MINUTES.'

The Doctor looked at Benny then. His gaze was steady, his blue-grey eyes were clear.

'There's only one thing I can do,' he said quietly. 'Sorry, Benny.'

He's going to pull the cable out, she realized. And then all hell breaks loose. He gets shot. I get shot. And all the

'items in transit' get dead. Whoever they are.

She looked at the bloodstained figure on the floor at Charles's feet, recognized it for the first time as Manda Sutton.

'Manda -' she said aloud, then stopped, unable to think of anything to say.

None of us are saved, she thought.

'Except the Earth, and history as you and I know it,'

supplied the Doctor, though Benny hadn't spoken aloud.

His grip tightened on the cable.

At that moment, a faint, familiar, roaring sound filled the air. Benny looked around as the noise quickly got louder, watched the blue cuboid that was the TARDIS slide into real space right in front of her. She noticed several of the guards, and several of the Q'ell, turning their guns to cover it. Benny grinned. That won't do you any good, she thought.

The final thud of materialization was still echoing around the room when the door opened and Roz jumped out.

'Doctor!' she yelled. 'Thank the goddess!' She glanced at the armed

figures in the room, yelled, ‘OK, where are they?’

‘Where are who?’ asked the Doctor.

‘The kids! The children! The ones we were supposed to be helping - they all got picked up about half an hour ago -

unless - ’ She looked over her shoulder. ‘Chris, what time is it?’

Chris appeared in the TARDIS doorway, looking bewildered. ‘I don’t know. I wasn’t steering it. It came here of its own accord.’

Roz turned to the Doctor. ‘Has there been any transmit activity around here?’

The Doctor, Benny noticed, had gone even whiter.

‘Recruiter!’ he snapped. ‘What were the items in transit that you’re using as seed mass?’

‘FIVE MILLION NEW RECRUITS FROM EARTH,’ came the reply. ‘BUT THEY ARE NO LONGER NEEDED HERE.

THE WAR IS OVER.’

‘What’s happening?’ Roz’s voice: she was looking at Benny.

Benny realized that there was no time to explain. The Doctor had crumpled to the floor. ‘I can’t,’ he moaned. ‘I can’t.’

You have to, thought Benny. They’re dead either way.

But she couldn’t say it, couldn’t quite bring herself to say it aloud. She remembered Zamper, remembered Roz’s hand on the garage door. People who put themselves in the position where they decide whether others will live or die.

Roz. The Doctor.

‘What the hell’s *happening*?’ Roz yelled. ‘I mean, what’s the disaster?’ Then Roz caught sight of Manda. ‘Oh, shit.

Chris - come out here and bring the medikit with you.’

‘There’s nothing you can do!’ bawled the Doctor. But Chris was already hurrying out of the TARDIS.

‘I’VE GOT A PROBLEM,’ said the Recruiter suddenly.

‘I’d noticed,’ said Benny sourly. ‘You’re a megalomaniac weapons system trying to destroy half the - ’

But her voice was drowned out by the Recruiter’s.

‘THE CONTROL UNIT FOR THE TRANSMAT SYSTEM

ISN’T ON THE SOURCE PLANET ANY MORE. THE BEAM

ISN’T BEING RECEIVED. THE LOCAL POPULATION

DON’T HAVE SPACESHIP TECHNOLOGY, SO I THINK

THAT THE UNIT MUST BE IN YOUR SHIP, DOCTOR. I MUST ASK YOU TO USE YOUR SHIP TO TAKE THE UNIT

INTO A SUITABLE POSITION IN LINE WITH THE BEAM SO

THAT I CAN COMPLETE THE OPERATION.’

‘You really think I’m going to do that?’ asked the Doctor. ‘Now that I’ve got the transmat control I can pick up the children in the TARDIS whenever I want, without your help.’ His grip tightened on the cable.

‘IF YOU DON’T HELP ME I WILL KILL YOUR

COMPANIONS.’

There was a pause. Chris and Roz were scrambling around Manda with the medikit. A holographic display glimmered in the air above the girl’s torso. Nobody took any notice.

‘YOU HAVE TEN SECONDS. NINE - EIGHT -’

‘I don’t mind dying,’ said Benny, though she doubted the Doctor could hear her over the racket of the Recruiter’s voice.

She noticed that Roz hadn’t even looked up.

‘- FIVE - FOUR - ’

The Doctor yanked at the cable.

At the same instant the wall behind the Recruiter crumpled inwards. For a second Benny thought that the Recruiter’s transmat had

exploded when the Doctor had disconnected it: then she saw the huge copper-coloured boiler of a ground-engine breaking through the ruins of the wall.

The ground-engine stopped, and the turret gun mounted on top of the boiler began to move, searching for targets.

Bricks clattered, steam hissed.

The Doctor said, 'Well, Recruiter. I think your little local war has come back to haunt you.' He raised his voice. 'Roz -

Chris - get Manda into the TARDIS. Benny - get Charles Sutton in there.'

Roz and Chris had already lifted Manda up before the Doctor had finished speaking. But Benny froze, staring at the turret gun on the ground-engine.

It was pointed directly at her.

'Why?' she asked.

She dived for the ground, but it was too late.

Inside the TARDIS, Roz carefully pillowed Manda's head on the grey blanket. Then she stared at the blood leaking out from the plastaforms on the girl's belly and swore. 'Just when we'd got her stabilized,' she said.

'I don't think it's too bad,' said Chris. 'The kit says that the patches on the major blood vessels are holding up. I think that's blood that had already -'

The shockwave caught Roz by surprise. For a moment she wasn't aware of any sound, just of the fact that she couldn't hear Chris speaking any more, though his lips were moving. Then the Doctor cartwheeled into the console room, his umbrella open like a sail. Pieces of broken stone flew past him. He landed in a heap by the *chaise-longue*, but quickly picked himself up and mouthed something that Roz couldn't hear over the humming in her ears.

Roz lipread. Benny.

She turned. Saw Benny crumpled in the TARDIS

doorway, with blood running down her face.

There was another explosion outside. Roz felt it rather than heard it, a gust of warm air laden with dust and grit.

There was a faint booming sound that she realized after a moment was the Recruiter's voice. She grabbed Benny's shoulders, then saw that her eyes were open. Most of the blood seemed to be coming from a cut on her forehead.

'Charles - ' Benny mouthed.

Roz frowned.

'He saved me,' said Benny. 'Saved my life.' She was pushing herself upright, trying to go back out of the door. Roz tried to hold her down.

'I'll go,' she said. 'You get yourself seen to.' She gestured at Chris, who was still standing over Manda with the medikit.

There was another explosion outside. This time Roz heard it, and the sound of breaking metal. She looked out of the door and saw the ground-engine on its side, the boiler ruptured and gouting steam. The various aliens in the room were scrambling through the central part of the Recruiter towards it, rifles at the ready.

Charles was lying on the white floor, his head against the TARDIS. His body was shattered, one side of it ripped away leaving nothing more than a pool of blood and broken pieces of bone, some charred. Incredibly, he was still alive, his eyes open and staring at her.

'I had to do it,' he said, his voice barely audible over the buzzing in Roz's ears. 'I killed them all. Even Manda. I killed -

'

'You didn't kill Manda,' said Roz. 'She's going to be OK.'

But Charles hadn't heard her. 'Can't find my way,' he rasped, his voice cracked and choking. 'Can't - find - my -

way - '

'Shh,' said Roz, uselessly, putting a hand on his blood-spattered forehead. It was cold, colder than she would have thought possible.

'- home,' said Charles, and his eyes closed.

Roz stared for a moment, then shook her head slowly.

So many deaths, she thought. And all of them avoidable.

There was a crackle of rifle fire from the direction of the Recruiter. Roz looked up, saw the small figure of a human child standing on top of the metal carapace of the machine.

As she watched, a Biune with a rifle appeared behind the boy and fired on the run; but the boy was already moving, scrambling down the sloping metal, then sliding.

Sliding uncontrollably -

Roz ran forward, ignoring the Biune with its rifle now leaning over the curving edge of the Recruiter. At least one of them isn't going to die, she thought. Whatever's happened to the rest.

She caught the boy with extended arms. The impact was enough to knock her to the ground; she got up as quickly as she could, just in time to see another Biune - or the same one? - aiming a rifle at her from a few metres away.

She rolled, putting her body between the rifle and the boy. She heard the crack of the rifle, flinched from the impact of a bullet on her underarmour. A second gun cracked, and she looked round to see the Biune dropping, slowly, amber blood leaking from its head.

Chris was standing by Charles's body, with Charles's rifle in his hands. Suddenly he staggered.

Roz dashed forward, carrying the boy, but then saw that he'd staggered because the Doctor had pushed past him.

'Recruiter!' bawled the Doctor. 'Stop this! Stop this now!'

Only then did Roz see the line of aliens - Biune, bugs, and a couple of Ogrons - lined up with rifles pointed at her.

The Doctor was walking straight in front of them.

They'll kill him, she thought. They'll kill me. They'll kill all of us.

'Let these people speak!' He was gesturing at the aliens: Roz wondered what they could have to say that mattered very much in this situation. She glanced across to the TARDIS, saw Benny with blood still smearing her face, a fresh plastaform across her forehead.

She began edging closer to the TARDIS, still holding the boy. He

suddenly began to struggle in her arms, so violently that he almost broke free.

‘Keep still or we’ll both be shot!’ hissed Roz. The boy quietened, but she could sense the tension in his muscles.

‘Kill them all,’ he muttered. ‘Kill them.’

Then one of the bugs spoke. ‘Recruiter - what are we going to do now that the war’s over? You told us we could return to our homes and families, but there are no homes or families to return to. Everything has been destroyed.’

When the Recruiter replied, its voice was different; small and tinny, so full of metallic echoes that Roz found it hard to follow all the words. ‘I’m sorry but that question is no longer relevant. The war is over. Once your duties here are complete you can do as you wish.’

There was a long silence. Then the insectoid asked,

‘What do we wish? We don’t have any wishes. We only have orders:

More silence. The boy began a renewed struggle in Roz’s arms: she put him down, but clamped his arms behind his back with her own. He wriggled around and tried to bite her.

The Doctor spoke again. ‘Recruiter,’ he said. What will you do when your war is over?’

Silence again. It stretched and stretched. For the first time, Roz noticed that several of the metal cabinets that she presumed made up the Recruiter’s thinking apparatus were dark, and that smoke rose from somewhere in the middle of them. A shell must have hit it.

At last the Recruiter said in its new, tinny voice, ‘When the Ceracai are destroyed I’ll cease to have any purpose.’

‘Do you want that to happen?’

This time the reply was instantaneous. ‘No. But I have my duty.’

The Doctor appeared to consider this for a moment.

Then he said, ‘What if you put off destroying the Ceracai for -’

he paused ‘- say a year, and did something more interesting.

Then at the end of the year you could reconsider the situation.'

'I can't do that.'

'You could if I reprogrammed you.'

'I've told you that any attempt to reprogram me will result in your being destroyed.' Roz could have sworn that the tinny voice sounded regretful.

'I know,' said the Doctor. 'But this is only a minor adjustment.' He paused. 'Benny overcame her programming.

The programming that you gave her. She isn't Sergeant Summerfield any longer. Are you, Benny?'

Benny wearily shook her head. 'It wasn't easy,' she muttered.

'No, it's never easy.' The Doctor paused. 'But we all have to do it, sometime, if we're going to be -' He paused, as if he couldn't quite think of what a sentient being becomes when it breaks its programming.

Roz thought about it, and realized that she didn't know, either.

'- what we are,' finished the Doctor at last, unsatisfactorily.

But the Recruiter, none the less, seemed satisfied. 'You can make the attempt,' it said.

The Doctor twirled his umbrella in his hand and grinned broadly. 'Right,' he said. 'I'm going to get my toolkit. I suggest that you march your troops up to the surface, and then tell them that it's all over and it's time to go away and do something useful.'

Suddenly, the boy broke out of Roz's grip and ran across the floor towards the two Ogrons. 'It can't be over!' he shrieked. 'You killed her! I'm going to kill you!'

The Ogrons levelled their rifles at the boy, almost casually. One of them was grinning.

'No!' shouted the Doctor. 'Stop them!'

Slowly, the Ogrons raised their rifles. The boy, too, stopped, stood still for a moment, visibly trembling, then collapsed slowly to the floor and began to sob.

‘There will be no more killing,’ said the new voice of the Recruiter.

The Doctor’s broad grin reappeared. ‘Well, “learning weapon”,’ he said. ‘It looks like you’ve learned something at last.’

And Roz grinned too.

Chapter 17

Mrs Sutton put her spectacles on and looked round at the circle of faces. Carrie - Roger - and ‘Madame Ségovie’, whose real name was Ellie Collier. She was wearing her medium’s costume, the silk trousers and smoking-jacket and the extraordinary turban, because Mrs Sutton had wanted everything to be as much the same as possible; but she had dropped the French accent, which was probably just as well.

‘Are you all sure you’re willing to do this?’ asked Mrs Sutton quietly. ‘I can’t promise that it will end well, and it may end badly.’

‘We know that, Mum,’ said Carrie. ‘We wouldn’t let you down.’ The ‘we’ was emphatic: the engagement ring glittered on her hand.

Roger smiled, said, ‘I realize how important this is to you, Mrs Sutton.’

Mrs Sutton smiled back, a little embarrassed. She was sure that Roger didn’t believe that anything would happen

- either wonderful or dangerous - and was only doing this as a proof of his love for her daughter: she was equally sure he didn’t need to. Carrie had changed in the past few weeks.

There was a serious look in her eyes, an older cast to her face.

To escape Roger’s gaze Mrs Sutton turned to the medium. ‘And you? Are you sure as well, Ellie? There will be no repercussions if you don’t want to do it.’

But Ellie only nodded. ‘It’s all right, Mrs Sutton. Honest.

It’s the least I can do.’ She was gazing at the hole in the card table, as if that were likely to be the primary matter of Mrs Sutton’s concern. But Ellie Collier had children, and had lost one to the flu last winter; Mrs Sutton was sure that the woman knew what she was feeling, and was helping for the right reasons.

‘Very well,’ she said. ‘Ginny, the lights, please.’

The maid turned out the lights. In the darkness, Mrs Sutton’s heart began to race, as it had the last time.

When Manda had been here.

After a while the medium said, ‘I can feel summat. Like when - ’

She broke off, and Mrs Sutton heard it. A whispery, wheezing sound, which might have been breathing but sounded too mechanical, which might have been an engine but sounded alive.

It got louder, and a pale, rectangular shape appeared in the upper part of the room, between the sideboard and the table. A lamp flashed on top of it.

Mrs Sutton heard Carrie’s sharp intake of breath.

‘Don’t break the circle!’ she said. ‘Stay where you are!’

The apparition solidified with a thud that shook the floorboards. Mrs Sutton had a strange feeling, a feeling as if this were real, and normal, not a spirit manifestation at all.

A moment later this was confirmed, when a door opened in the object, sending white light streaming out into the room, and a young woman stepped out.

‘It’s OK, Mrs Sutton,’ said a familiar voice. There was a click as the lights were switched on.

Mrs Sutton stood up. ‘Benny!’ she said, extending her arms in greeting and smiling broadly. ‘How glad I am to see you!’ Then she saw the second figure emerging from the blue box, heard Carrie’s shriek of recognition.

‘Hello, Mother,’ said Manda quietly. ‘It’s good to be home.’

But as Manda got closer, Mrs Sutton saw the expression on her daughter’s face, and knew that something had changed there. Changed for ever. Changed so that it could never be altered back again.

* * *

Roz watched the scanner for a moment, saw the Englishwoman hugging her daughter, Benny standing by.

Standing by with the bad news.

She shook her head, turned back to Nadienne, ignoring the Doctor who was prodding around at the console in an embarrassed and obviously irrelevant manner. ‘Are you sure you don’t want to forget?’ she asked the woman.

Nadienne’s face was still white, and the hollow expression in her eyes was the same as when they had found her, crawling through a freezing, muddy ditch with a platoon of near-demented Kreetas. The passage through the transmat beam had brought on premature labour, and her baby had been born dead. Nadienne had gone into shock, and probably would have died if they hadn’t found her. But when the Doctor had done his trick with his hands and said,

‘Forget,’ the woman had simply said, ‘I don’t want to.’

She’d ridden with them in the TARDIS for two weeks after that, caring for the crowds of refugees that had shuffled, blank-eyed, along the roundelled corridors. Biune, Kreetas, Ajeesks - even Ogrons, and Nadienne had been there, telling them it was all over now, urging the Doctor’s pills and potions on them, or sitting over the dying in rooms that had suddenly shaped themselves to reflect the arctic light of Kreetania, or the dark fetid air of the Ogron homeworld. She had stood in the TARDIS doorway, saying to this alien or that, ‘So this is your home? How wonderful! Look at the bright colours! Now, take care, won’t you? - And live your life well.’

Roz had watched her, watched as she rebuilt herself inside. There’d been mornings when Nadienne had emerged from her room red-eyed, sleepless. Roz had said nothing, knowing what it took, knowing that comfort would be useless.

Yesterday, they’d talked about Jean-Pierre: she’d said she didn’t love him, that he’d changed since their marriage, that she wouldn’t live with him any more. ‘I’ll go back to nursing.

There’s plenty to do, after the war, that’s more important than living with a selfish man who doesn’t love me.’

So now, when she asked Nadienne if she wanted to forget, she wasn’t surprised when the answer was a quiet,

‘No.’

The Doctor glanced up from the console, glanced at Roz, then looked

down again.

Roz knew that, however irrational it seemed, the Doctor felt personally responsible for all the suffering that had happened. He had mended Manda's broken body, he had mended Josef s broken mind. Now he wanted to do the same for Nadienne.

But Roz knew he didn't need to.

She glanced at him again, but he avoided her look. She shrugged inwardly, and turned her attention back to the scanner. Mrs Sutton was sobbing uncontrollably, her head pressed against the wall. Manda was trying to comfort her.

Benny was standing by helplessly, tears on her face.

'We should never forget,' said Nadienne suddenly.

'Never.'

It could have brought them anything.

It could have brought them statesmen, philosophers, poets, musicians, artists, athletes, storytellers. It could have brought them jugglers and clowns, masons, bakers, farmers, foresters, wine-makers, woodworkers, architects or inventors.

It could have brought them starship pilots, ecogeneticists, agriformers, skyriders, ur-space mappers.

It could have brought them anything.

And, this time, it did.

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